Customer Channeling Arrangements in Market Organization: Competition Dynamics in the Funeral Business in France

Pascale Trompette

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ABSTRACT

The problematic of how supply and demand meet on a particular market is at the core of the economic sociology project, which for several years has produced detailed analyses of how judgments of the quality of products and service providers are constructed prior to the exchange relation. Observation of how funeral business services come to be purchased and analysis of competition dynamics on local funeral service markets bring to light certain alternative ways of organizing the marketplace encounter. The article describes the devices used to capture this market, particularly the socio-technical arrangements for channeling customers toward a single service provider. It shows the degree to which provider activity, relations among competitors, and the market regulation game in this sector are structured by the production of an economy of customer capture.

Recent developments in economic sociology have produced intense reflection on the interface between customer and market. Sociologists grounded in the economics of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1987) have studied a great variety of markets to identify the terms in which the quality of goods or persons on them are assessed (on goods assessment see Favereau, 1989; on...
assessment of persons see Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal, 1997), with the understanding that these assessment terms are what found the grammar of coordination. These studies use a generalized version of the “economy of quality” model (Karpik, 1989) in detailed explorations of customer judgment activity and the various arrangements that make it possible to overcome market opaqueness.\(^{(1)}\) From market uncertainty to the complexity of calculation in a space of proliferating choice, the new sociology of the market offers finely detailed descriptions of the socio-cognitive embedding of calculation as a distributed activity (Callon, 1998; Callon and Muniesa, 2003; Cochoy, 2002). From one approach to another, the concept of “qualification”, understood as a process of defining the qualities and quality of goods and persons, gradually came to represent a unifying theoretical space in which many different approaches to market intermediation come together, complement each other and occasionally compete.\(^{(2)}\)

This brief review of sociological approaches to the market is hardly exhaustive, but it is fair to say that sociologists using these approaches work within a dominant representation of the market encounter as involving a process of judgment that occurs before market or contract commitment. Customer and service provider may of course learn about each other before the qualification process kicks into play; knowledge in this case is co-produced in the course of exchanges between them, exchanges in turn framed by socio-technical devices or arrangements (Dubuisson-Quellier, 1999).\(^{(3)}\) However, that process still seems the fundamental first moment, decisive for whether or not the encounter leads to a trade (De Bandt and Gadrey, 1994, Licoppe et al., 2002).\(^{(4)}\)

Observation of the circumstances in which funeral services are purchased, together with analysis of competition dynamics in local funeral service markets,\(^{(5)}\) make us aware that there are other ways of organizing the market deployed by means of sequences, among which we can distinguish three generic moments: preparation, transaction, and use of goods and services. These three stages, which occasionally overlap, roughly correspond to economists’ functional breakdown between the \textit{ex ante} or “before” function, the transaction, and the \textit{ex post} or “after” transaction” (Licoppe et al., 2002, p. 101). Barcet and Bonamy’s contribution to the study of service relations and markets presents similar reasoning applied to the service economy (De Bandt and Gadrey, 1994, pp. 153-174).

\(^{(1)}\) These socio-technical devices are related to a set of impersonal forms (symbolic-material arrangements) and forms implying persons (social network, quality of persons), all in turn involved in ordering the world that consumer choices are made in and shaping contract partners’ action principles.


\(^{(3)}\) In this understanding, supply and demand do not preexist the meeting between the two but are co-constructed by the partners through the play of anticipation, exchange processes and negotiations, interactions and learning.

\(^{(4)}\) This reading is particularly well illustrated by Licoppe, Pharabod and Assadi, who explain: “Ordinary consumption is a process

\(^{(5)}\) Though geographic mobility and the upheaval of the family structure have considerably increased the potential length of the funeral itinerary, funerals remain a local service. The structure of this market is characterized by local markets highly concentrated in cities, due to the fact that such a large proportion of deaths occur in hospitals and clinics.
encounter, ways that not only do not involve any staging of the market as market but that may altogether preclude such staging. Instead of a proliferation of arrangements for assisting customers in their labor of judgment, what we find in the funeral service sector are symbolic-material arrangements that structure customer circulation and rigorously format customer contact with one service provider from among all competing ones. Following the itinerary of customers on the funeral service market, we see the boundary between the “before” and “after” of exchange relations –i.e., between the moment of contract commitment and the moment at which the purchased goods and services are actually delivered to the customer– dissolve. This situation is an incentive to paying closer attention to the process, which appears the main arrangement in the organizational dynamic of this market for capturing the customer and his “commitment” (Clark and Szmigin, 2003).

This article proceeds in three parts. First, it considers buyers of funeral services (“the family”, as they are wont to be called in the funeral business) at the crucial moment when, just informed of the death of a relative, they find themselves on the threshold of the funeral market. Here we meet a social figure of particular interest in sociological analysis: the lost customer (Cochoy, 2004; Karpik, 1989). The customer in this case is an agent who is both implicated in a highly “involving” purchase (in terms of cost and concern about service quality) and quite lost (market opaqueness, strong uncertainty about quality). These market subjects are a fundamental component of what may be called the economy of customer capture or channeling organized by funeral businesses: they are latched onto by arrangements that then frame their trajectory through the funeral market. The second part studies the service process as the locus for organizing customer circulation. We consider how the socio-technical networks mobilized in that process work to control the movements of the deceased and his or her relatives and channel customers to encounter one particular business operator. This observation leads to identifying the service process as the special focus of competitive strategies and struggles in the market regulation game. In the third part we examine more closely the mechanisms on the customer’s path that serve to draw her in and along. We try to grasp in finer detail the social networks and symbolic-material fittings that fuel the particular economy of circulation on this market, and to qualify the devices that produce customer commitment in the exchange relation.


(7) The notion of “capturing” the customer or audience (captation) has recently acquired full conceptual weight as developed in the thinking of F. Cochoy and his co-contributors (2004). Their project is significantly different from the one adopted in this article. Their notion of “capture” has a broad meaning that allows for simultaneously encompassing and examining a multiplicity of modes (attraction, seduction, loyalizing, selection) and arrangements (packaging, e-trade, scoring, etc.) for organizing the market encounter. I prefer to restrict the notion of captation to the idea of “forced channeling” that in fact precludes the play of the market. This distinction seems an effective way of analytically distinguishing between the different means by which exchange protagonists enter into relation with each other.
A market made up of “lost customers”

We can enter into the problematic of the encounter between a family and a funeral business by analyzing customer “dispositions”, before turning to the “arrangements” [dispositifs] (Cochoy, 2004, pp. 20-21) that lead, guide, and channel customers along the path to a funeral parlor door. Funeral market customers are in the singular situation of committing themselves to an “involving” purchase when in fact they are particularly unskilled in calculating and judging quality and are facing a “supply” space that is usually entirely unknown to them.

An “involving” purchase

Before we go to meet the funeral service customer in his decidedly trying situation, it seems important to recall some of the properties that characterize the object of this market relation, if only to give full impact to the contrast between the commitment required and the obstacles to rationalizing the choice of a service provider.

Funeral parlors offer a range of services, both physiological and symbolic, pertaining to transforming the body of the deceased. Funeral parlor activities involve both technical operations for transporting, handling, caring for and “conditioning” the body, and ritual operations that pertain to “passing”, paying last respects, and family reconstruction after death. These two types of activities are indissociably linked. The purchase of funeral parlor services may be considered an “involving” purchase in that it exposes the customer to both a hefty financial investment and concern about service quality. (8) Considering first the economic component, we can say that funerals are anywhere from a heavy to an extremely heavy expense depending on family’s budget constraints: the average cost of a funeral is €2,500 to €2,900 (not including burial plot and possible marble accessories). (9) If we now look at the qualitative determinants, we can say that the funeral business is an essential participant in the symbolic actions elaborated around the deceased. (10) Funeral directors manage props, assume walk-on parts, and these days have become stage managers. Funeral parlor staff have become the main performers in last-respects rites and it is they who give funerals their form, linked to the idea of the sacred while representing a major earthly event, including the three ritual

(8) My use of the word “involving” (impliquant) is only a slight deflection of the notion of “consumer involvement” in purchasing certain categories of products, a subject on which the marketing sciences have produced abundant literature (Zaichkowsky, 1985).


(10) I am only concerned here with the visible dimensions of the service and have left aside the problem of handling and preparing a dead body, a matter seldom mentioned by families due to the social taboo and related paucity of knowledge about those “back office” operations.
meditation moments, *i.e.*, the viewing or visitation, the procession, and the funeral ceremony (burial, cremation). Funeral parlors orchestrate symbolic manifestations of the strength of personal ties, either in terms of public pomp or, as we tend to see today, the authenticity of the affective link between family and deceased, the emotion caused by the death. In other words, we have here all the properties of an “economy of quality”, where the purchase of goods and services involves the notion of incommensurability. The point is to show the depth of loss and grieving for “the loved one”, in a relation that is both private (paying one’s debt to the departed by way of a dignified last rite) and public (making a lofty gift that will win social approval).

With these characteristics in mind, we should by all rights meet up with a customer who defines and ranks the professional qualities of competing service providers (Callon and Muniesa, 2003), in this case managing price and quality variables in accordance with the weight and significance of the homage-paying constraint that propels him. In other words, we would expect the customer in the market for this service to try to situate himself in one way or another as best he can in a space of differentiated supply, making use of one or another of the existing arrangements for aiding customers in their labor of judgment.

**An illegitimate market**

After assessing the properties likely to involve the client in a search for the best service provider, we can now look at why it is extremely difficult, even impossible, for him to rationalize his choice. This problematic, which is familiar in sociology of the market, confronts us with a relatively original situation (though its effects are not as singular as what founds it): the funeral business is an actor strongly reluctant to show itself as partaking of a market, since that market is considered illegitimate. In other words, the limits of this competitive market have to do not so much with any objective conditions of market organization (Garcia, 1986) as with the social taboo against staging this market *as* market. This state of affairs has at least one major effect on the problem of bringing together customer and service provider: it produces supply-side opaqueness, due primarily to the fact that there is little public representation of these particular professionals.

The funeral market is socially illegitimate (Thompson, 1991). First, the “undertaker” is a marginalized professional figure. Despite the fact that his status has changed from tradesman to funeral service professional, the jobs encompassed by this occupation still have an aftertaste of social declassment. Not only do undertakers keep company with cadavers, but they incur moral sanction for daring to draw economic profit from trade in symbolic goods (Henaff, 2002). This taboo is a problem for enterprising undertakers who might like to put their business on stage —advertise it— in hopes of becoming the “chosen” provider. From the first toddling steps of competition to the time of instituted markets, funeral businesses have been prevented from using
advertising or classic marketing techniques because those techniques are considered blatant signifiers of the market world.\(^{(11)}\) Doomed to exist on a market that is doomed to deny that it is one, funeral businesses concerned to publicize their practices became expert in the art of dissimulation and euphemism (Armour and Williams, 1981). Here the market differentiation game runs into obvious obstacles. First and foremost, it is deprived of a number of public spaces for deploying itself.

Funeral professionals have in common with others (lawyers, doctors) the constraint of supply non-visibility, but for very different reasons. Advertising and commercial canvassing are allowed – except during the funeral or preparations for it. More importantly, the specific matter of price transparency\(^{(12)}\) and the more general one of defining an economic space conducive to smooth encounters between supply and demand\(^{(13)}\) have been the focus of attentive, extensive regulation in France, namely in 1993 when this business sector was liberalized. If funeral market goods are “shrouded in mystery”, this is due not so much to the fact that they escape direct assessment by a profane clientele as to the ostracism that the public has always tended to inflict on this “inverted” professional figure.

Lost customers

Not only does the social sanction against this market weigh on its would-be entrepreneurs, but it negatively impacts on the clientele’s consuming dispositions, as they are hardly inclined to go about checking out funeral parlors in anticipation of a possible death in the family. In fact, neither the future deceased nor his family are at all likely to anticipate the purchase of funeral services in any systematic, reasonable way.

Our anthropological dispositions keep us at a comfortable distance from the life of the dead – until such time as we are reminded of our mortal condition. As P. Baudry (1995), following L.-V. Thomas (1980), explains, the

\(^{(11)}\) For two centuries, up until 1993 when the activity was opened to competition, the funeral business in France was economically organized in the form of a public-sector monopoly, though this never covered all funeral-related services. It was therefore possible for competition – in the form of “funeral agencies” – to develop on the margins of the monopoly. This competition grew increasingly intense and widespread up until the time the monopoly was abolished.

\(^{(12)}\) The French government decree of May 9, 1995, specifying national regulations for funeral businesses defines how families are to be informed about prices and specifies the obligations of state-owned companies and private businesses or associations certified to provide funeral services. The decree makes it compulsory to post a list of qualified funeral operators (town hall, health care institutions, funerariums) and provide families with a funeral cost estimate, and indicates the required conditions for drawing up a customer order.

\(^{(13)}\) The 1993 law standardized funeral service products, services and facilities and established nationwide service homogeneity. The rules requiring professionals to inform consumers about prices, etc. were an attempt to create transparency; the definition of “professional abilities” and the imposing of “morality” constraints on anyone operating in the sector represent uniform “qualification” (as defined above) of all potential service providers in this new market space.
The ineluctable taboo of death is none other than the expression of our human determination to exclude from our lifetime the virtuality of our passing out of it. “Few people make place for their own death, largely because of magical fears that to do so will hasten it. Most wills are drafted shortly before death.” (Dunham, 1963). “Likewise, people rarely prearrange their own funerals, despite the evidence that this reduces expenses considerably” (Zelizer, 1978). Purchasing funeral services has little to do with consumption desire and pleasure; it is usually a matter of urgency and constraint. And even supposing the death does not involve the sudden violence of an accident, the family is not likely to feel very comfortable about leaving the dying person’s bedside to go organize his or her funeral.

The recent development of the “foresight” market in France, following intense publicity campaigns, is symptomatic of a new positive attitude toward funeral contracts and is comparable to what V. A. Zelizer showed for life insurance in the United States. (14) Seniors have been hesitant to enter the world of death insurance; moreover, this form of insurance is concerned more with capitalization than planning one’s own funeral (e.g., designating a funeral service provider). It is estimated that funeral contracts represent only 10% of today’s market. (15) Generally, then, the future departed has only limited influence on the process of choosing a funeral business and organizing her funeral. And even if she was careful to make her choices in the matter known to those who will be hosting her funeral, it often happens that spouse, children and relatives find their own ways of following the dead’s last wishes. Though the dead is the center of attention on these occasions, they have been fairly reduced to silence; funerals are usually designed by the living.

Because the purchase of funeral services is so unlikely to be rationally anticipated, it is very likely to be made under the constraints of emotional shock and time. “At such a moment...” the families say, to justify their inadequate handling of the matter. But we should not overestimate the hindrance represented by emotional upset. Not all families are under the stress of sudden death, and funeral logistics are usually taken in hand by the most experienced and hardened persons in the family group. The time constraint, however, does systematically impact on the decision-making process. By French law a body must be buried or cremated within six working days. But getting a service to take charge of the body is in fact a much more urgent matter, if only because of the extremely strict regulations on moving it. (16) A late-night telephone call, an urgent summons from hospital staff, the discovery of a dead body in the house— from the instant relatives are informed of the death, they are caught up in the imperious necessity of dealing with what are now the mortal

(14) Death insurance is now considered an excellent way of freeing one’s descendants from the moral and financial burden of a funeral.

(15) “The prévoyance [foresight] packages presented by funeral professionals today represent only 10% of the potential market. We may with relative optimism hope to see funeral professionals penetrate 20% of the market. It would be unreasonable to hope for more” (Funéraire magazine, June 2003, 136).

(16) A body has to be admitted to a funerarium within 24 hours of the time of death, 48 hours if already embalmed.
remains of their loved one. The anxiety at having to deal with a decaying body, the beginnings of the social and symbolic process of detachment often mean the family is in a hurry to put the deceased at a distance. Within health care institution walls, which is where we are most likely to do our dying these days, the announcement of death is often concomitant with the need for an immediate decision about the first stage of the deceased’s itinerary: is he to be transported to a privately managed funerarium, kept at home, moved to the public morgue, embalmed? (17)

In economic theory, time is a fundamental variable in the purchasing process. “This point is essential”, writes C. Riveline (1991), “and it is worthwhile looking at more closely. In economic theory, the decision-maker may be summed up by a function that characterizes his preferences. [...] He is understood to make his calculations on the basis of all necessary information. The fact is that in an emergency situation, not only is the amount of information the decision-maker can take into account limited by the time she has for acquiring it, but the possibilities open to her for receiving advice and reflecting on her best interests are significantly reduced”.

Failure to anticipate in this case clearly cannot be compensated for by constructing experience and practicing repeated exchange. Statistics show that one is unlikely to purchase many funeral services in the course of a lifetime: the average is one or two. And even if this is not a perfectly adequate reflection of how often we meet with undertakers, (18) we readily acknowledge that the customer is not likely to have particularly clear ideas about the content of the service being purchased. With the exception of the ceremony itself, he has little grasp of the many technical and practical activities involved (embalming; organizing the service) though these are the very content of the service order being awarded the provider.

An exceptional, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime purchase, unanticipated and made under emergency conditions, exposed to a deficit in knowledge about the content of the service performed and much more likely to be motivated by constraint than desire Parsons (2003) –the combination of these different factors means we are dealing with a customer deprived of all consumer skills and simultaneously caught up in practical considerations that must be handled under tight time constraints:

When the occasion for grieving arrives, the first priority is to allow the deceased to make a dignified “passage” given that the service provider must be chosen quickly and that the relatives are often not familiar with any of the relevant businesses. This explains once again the extreme ambivalence attaching to the image of the funeral service operator: though his presence is a relief at the particular moment –and when the demise is unexpected, the family may experience his intervention as comforting– once the shock of the death has passed, rational consumer behavior resurfaces, and then people often have the feeling they

(17) The medical questionnaire filled out by the physician establishing the death certificate requires specifying how the body may be treated: Can it be moved? Is it in a condition to be embalmed? The physician is supposed to answer these questions solely in reference to the deceased’s medical condition, but often questions the family about how they intend to proceed with the body.

(18) I.e., on the occasion of burials.
were taken captive by the operator. Not only was the choice made without comparing services or prices, but most respondents still do not have a very clear idea what services they bought.

(Le vécu ou la perception du deuil et des obsèques [The experience and perception of grieving and funerals]. Études du CREDOC [Centre de Recherche pour l’Étude et l’Observation des Conditions de Vie, 1999]).

The considerable energy that various consumer organizations and spokespersons in France—the media, the consumer advocate press and the DGCCRF(19)—invest in informing and advising funeral service customers attests to how weak and vulnerable those buyers are up against the “merchants in the temple”, immediately suspected of being conmen. Since the 1980s in France, this illegitimate market has been a favorite target of consumer advocates.(20) Regular news coverage, extensive “special reports” in magazines, calls for vigilance—the market is perpetually denounced as unfair. But attempts at consumer education run up against obvious barriers. They can definitely help legitimize the kind of calculating behavior—comparing estimates, getting price information by phone—that has always been socially considered a kind of offense in connection with the death of a loved one. But they only reach a relatively small number of customers, those who give priority to the price criterion for a service that, as explained, generally brings into play an economy-of-quality type demand for singularity.

From the lost customer to sociology of the market

We now know enough about the characteristics of the funeral service buyer to examine what becomes of him on the market in question. While we have seen that consumer ontology varies by degree of anticipation and attachment to the duty of paying last respects to the deceased, what dominates is the fact that this economic agent has to make an “involving” purchase and that there are many obstacles to making a reasoned choice: emotion, urgency, ignorance. The social figure of the “lost customer” is not entirely unfamiliar to market sociology; indeed, the “economy of quality” model itself was developed on the basis of a situation implying very similar constraints (Karpik, 1989). We know that this type of customer is generally destined to meet up with intermediaries capable of reducing uncertainty about quality and helping him in his attempts to get oriented (Granovetter, [1974] 1995). But while the “market as network” seems a possible means of mediating the encounter between a

(19) DGCCRF: Direction Générale de la Concurrence, de la Consommation et de la Répression des Fraudes [General department for competition, consumption and combating fraud], the state administration in charge of market regulation.

(20) In the 1980s, Michel Leclerc [famed consumer-advocate supermarket chain owner] began his war against the Pompes Funèbres Générales funeral service corporation, which at the time had cornered 60% of the funeral service market (80% of public-sector contracts: funeral services at the time were still a public-sector monopoly which city authorities contracted out to “concessionnaires”; see n. 11). Leclerc wanted—and got—heavy media coverage for the conflict. The consumer press and all the media denounced the company as a shameless merchant profiting from the ignorance and vulnerability of bereaved families.
family and a funeral parlor, (21) we can hypothesize that this regulation model is not dominant here. It gets competition from other mechanisms that instead steer and channel the customer and function as an alternative to the labor of identifying and assessing differentiated suppliers.

We are immediately moved to ask how it is that our lost customer is spared the work of searching for information, even by the minimal word-of-mouth method; why instead she allows herself to be led, guided, channeled along the entire length of the path to the funeral parlor door. Two explanatory hypotheses present themselves. In the first we assume that the consumer, in the throes of the dilemma between the quality priority and the obstacles to rationalizing his choice, is in a state of “anomic” (Cusin, 2004): “Conscious of his cognitive limits and the complexity of supply, the consumer may well feel inhibited by the fear of making a wrong choice. Allowing himself to be captured; i.e., accepting a reduction of the field of possibility and agreeing to delegate part of the decision-making, helps him out of a situation of indeterminacy and uncertainty”. In this view the customer gives up on making any prolonged attempt at selection, making instead the “choice that had to be made”, thereby escaping the discomfort of making a random choice. The second hypothesis, which I prefer though I do not wish entirely to discard the first, affirms the strength of the socio-technical devices used by funeral service entrepreneurs to organize the customer’s pre-traced destiny. In this scenario, “being active or reactive” –sociological qualities commonly attributed to the consumer engaged in a complex selection process– would amount to “swimming against the current”. In other words, regardless of how lost he may or may not be, the customer in the market for a funeral service never moves about in an open, indeterminate space but is induced, on the contrary, to circulate in a structured one.

To pursue this analysis, it is now necessary to follow our customers, steered along whether they like it or not, through the sequential process leading to their purchase of the organizing services of a funeral business. It seems important to shift the focus from the buyer’s cognitive torments to the efficiency of the service process. Funeral service professionals have acquired great familiarity with the lost customers that people their market. They have learned to mark them out, even track them down. They have developed ways of apprehending them without being perceived to do so, and facilities and framing arrangements that structure the market encounter much more effectively than chance. We shall now try to describe the material facilities and symbolic equipment used to channel the customer. They bring to light the hidden side of how the funeral market is organized, the one where the paths

(21) Here the network is not so much a personal one (friends, acquaintances) as a network made up of interlocutors in the immediate vicinity of the deceased. The actors present at the time the dying person was taken in charge –hospital staff, members of the religious or cultural community, members of a relevant association– or who were in some kind of contact with the family during the long or not-so-long wait preceding death may act as intermediaries. However, network mediation does not systematically entail the prescription function, as we shall see.
followed are neither qualification as defined above or the orchestrating of a social network. The funeral service sector proves a genuine laboratory for exploring alternative competition dynamics.

Organizing the process: professional networks, socio-technical networks

Economics and sociology literature has long explored the particularly problematic character of the economic relation of service transactions.\(^{(22)}\) This is due to time-deferred use value, implying that the product traded does not pre-exist contract-governed exchange but comes into play only after that exchange. We now need to identify an entire series of contexts in which a socio-technical capacity, if only partial, is activated before any business contract is signed. The unfolding of the process seems a particularly well-adapted means of framing the customer’s progress on the market and of “interesting” him— in the sociology-of-science-and-technology sense of that word (Callon, 1986)— in a particular service provider.

To describe this other means of organizing the market relation, we now follow the funeral business as it shapes the socio-technical networks that structure the service process. The customer-channeling procedures we are interested in here have been constitutive of competition dynamics in the funeral market since that market first developed. The techniques and means changed over history, in synch with changes in ways of dealing with the dying or deceased, namely the relatively new practice of end-of-life medicalization. But the principles governing this economy of circulation remained relatively similar from one period to the next, as we shall see.

Concessionnaires and funeral agencies: competition at the townhall gates

The problematics of customer channeling first developed in France when competition began developing at the edges of what was a municipal monopoly on funeral services. The *pompes-funèbres*, a service profession whose function was to organize funerals, came into existence in France in the nineteenth century, when businesses specializing in the services and furnishings required for funerals began to flower in the major cities. Some of these businesses managed to become “concessionnaires” of the municipal authorities’ monopoly on managing funeral processions and burials (Kselman, 1993). Other businesses, called “funeral agencies”, were at first confined to trade in accessories: flowers, wreaths, etc.\(^{(23)}\) When funeral agencies tried to compete

\(^{(22)}\) See analysis of contract and wage relations in Salais (1989) and Salais and Thévenot (1986), and of subcontracting in Baudry (1994).

\(^{(23)}\) The public-sector monopoly was limited to organization of the funeral procession. It included sale of the casket and outer casket trimmings, lease of a hearse (first horsedrawn, then motorized) and four pallbearers, as well as basic services such as
with concessionnaires in sales of accessories, the latter made moves to establish themselves as exclusive providers. The funeral agencies reacted by suggesting to customers that they might delegate to the agency the matter of negotiating funeral organization with the concessionnaires.\(^{(24)}\) It was not at all an easy matter, however, for these “funeral agents” to make a living as intermediaries between the family of the deceased and the city’s established funeral operator, the *société des pompes funèbres*.

In the early twentieth century, people were still dying at home, meaning that it was not yet possible to map French mortality. The deceased was a sedentary entity that remained at home until the funeral proper in a room that had been quickly transformed by funeral operators into a *chambre mortuaire*. Meanwhile the family went to pay its compulsory visit to the town hall to declare the death and organize the funeral. The town hall at the time was much more than the institution charged with administratively certifying the death; this was also where casket and other furnishings were purchased and the logistics of the ceremonial procession settled. The town’s funeral official, a relatively high-level civil servant whose job was to plan processions,\(^{(25)}\) together with a concessionnaire sales representative received the family at the town hall. The close links between these different actors made it virtually impossible for any competing actors to intervene. The death was officially certified, the procession organized and the funeral furnishings purchased at one place and time. It was precisely the *integration* of these different components of funeral organization that made the meeting between the family and the *pompes funèbres*, the latter acting as holder of a municipal contract to sell funeral services, highly likely if not unavoidable.

Funeral agencies on the other hand, by “nature” not very visible, could only secure a place on the market if the customer escaped the grip of the concessionnaire. This explains the feverish agitation at the town hall entrance, as reported by the mayor of Lyon in 1905:

\(^{(24)}\) The funeral agencies’ main argument was that they were warning families of the potential abuses of the town concessionnaires, abuses due to their monopoly position. For both market actors (concessionnaires and funeral agencies), the main issue was how the “basket of merchandise” was composed; specifically, the respective proportions of heavily taxed items (up to 50% of sales price) and non- or lightly taxed items.

\(^{(25)}\) The funeral official was an agent of the prefecture [representative of French state power at the local level] employed in a town’s Public Records office and an official delegate of the *arrondissement* [city administrative district] mayor.
Declarations of death are made in six district town halls. Funeral shops have opened up around them all. The clerks wait at the town hall doors to ambush people coming to declare a death. As soon as such a person appears, he is immediately surrounded, solicited, grabbed onto and yanked back and forth by those wishing to secure his custom. (Rubat du Merac, 1905).

We see the desperate attempts of funeral agents to get in ahead of the concessionnaire by stationing themselves at the entrance to the town hall, and thereby to interfere with the family’s pretraced destiny –whereas the family had only come to perform its legal duty of declaring the death. Alternatively, the funeral agent would try to track down bereaved families before they got as far as the town hall. The businessman’s compass would lead him to all actors in contact with families before the death. These were mainly protagonists of the last sacrament:

A funeral agency cannot wait for customers; it has to go out after them. It cannot settle for watching the deceased go by, but must energetically seek out the dying. Yes indeed, that’s how it happens. A good “agency” clerk visits the churches, gets to talking with “the verger”, “the beadle”, “the sexton”, ... “the holy-water distributor” and all informed “church-folk” whom he thinks might be able to tell him something about church customers, those who have been... and those who are likely to become so again. (Théodore-Vibert, 1905).

A funeral agent who managed to win a family’s custom was not out of the woods yet. His first interlocutor was the town funeral official, whose good graces he needed to get into to get a “good time slot” for his customer’s procession. (When it came to procession logistics, the mutual understanding between the town funeral official and the concessionnaire was obviously highly beneficial to the latter.) “These indiscreet tradesmen congest our town hall offices while circumventing our clerks so as to get their customers the best procession times”, complained the mayor of Lyon. When the town funeral official disappeared as an intermediation figure, the funeral concessionnaire was at leisure to increase impediments to competition from funeral agencies and thereby disqualify their attempts to intervene. In big cities, the concessionnaire’s man in charge of scheduling processions became an indispensable interlocutor, and to get into his good graces one might even slip him a little something:

Families [of the deceased] are regularly subjected to appalling, sometimes unbearable pressure. In some towns the concessionnaire companies fix the funeral procession schedule to suit themselves, claiming they cannot furnish pallbearers or a hearse at other hours. It goes without saying that families who have confided the entire task of managing the funeral to the concessionnaire company, including both [taxed services that are part of the municipal monopoly and untaxed services that private businesses may provide], are likely to be awarded the most suitable time slots. (Presentation of the government bill on funeral counselors and private funeral businesses by Mme Troisier, January 15, 1970).

Agencies and concessionnaires were clearly not equal competitors, but that asymmetry is not entirely explained by the monopolistic rules framing economic organization of the activity. Concessionnaires’ affiliation with the...
municipalities put them in an excellent position to take advantage of the
confusion of spaces and methods for organizing funeral processions, and they
captured nearly all family “flow”. Agencies, on the other hand, partisans of
competition on the threshold of a monopoly, could only station themselves on
customers’ paths and try to enlist anyone who found himself there “naturally”.

What can be learnt from this historical overview about concessionnaires’
stratagems for capturing the customer? First, activities were integrated
“upstream” of the sector, ensuring confusion between administrative formal-
ties and commercial exchange negotiations. Second, the alliances struck
between favorite partners were based on a combination of public networks,
tacit practical arrangements and economic profit.

From town hall to hospital

Some decades later (1960) we find our band of competing undertakers
seized by the same agitation but at a different location. Funeral businesses
now began staking out the territory immediately surrounding hospitals and
their high concentrations of dead. The arrangements were about the same,
except that now not only the families got channeled and steered along but also
the dead themselves. Rather than waiting at the side of the road taken by
bereaved families, funeral businesses headed out to capture the cadavers.
With the rise in end-of-life medicalization, hospitals (and assimilated)
became places where the once scattered deceased were now concentrated.(27)
Overwhelmed by the sudden invasion of the dead, these institutions were not
ready at either the practical or symbolic level to deal with their remains.
Private funeral operators here encountered a providential opportunity to
conquer matters “upstream of the industry”. They began investing in a new
facility, the chambre funéraire or funerarium, a mortuary which they alone
would manage. This temporarily spared hospitals from having to invest in
equipment ad hoc: the supply was immediate, efficient and of course less
costly than such investment. Since the 1960s, the number of chambres
funéraires has risen dramatically; they have taken over from public hospital
morgues and are now the preferred place for receiving dead bodies. Modeled
on the American “funeral home”, the chambre funéraire is a private morgue
run by a funeral operator where the remains of the deceased may be sheltered,
bathed, embalmed and otherwise prepared for viewings or visitations. The
dead, removed from the hospital but not yet arrayed for their funeral, find a
temporary resting place here devoted entirely to them. In the “back office”
they are kept in technical facilities (refrigerated compartments, lockers),

(27) It is worthwhile recalling that in 1964,
63.2% of French people were still dying at
home as opposed to 33.5% in hospitals and
assimilated (e.g., public old-age homes, private
retirement homes). Twenty years later the
proportions were reversed: 66% of deaths in
1984 occurred in hospitals and assimilated,
30.5% at home.
washed, dressed, embalmed; the “front office” offers a reception area for their families, visitation salons, a ceremony room.

Funerariums may be understood as an innovation in service supply that produced major change and improvement in service quality. But for private funeral operators, it is also and above all a means of more directly controlling the circulation of the dead. Since the 1970s, the development of the funeral trade in France has been synonymous with the creation of *chambres funéraires*. From 1960 to 1980 the *Pompes Funèbres Générales* company or *PFG*, already the market leader during the town monopoly era, lived its finest hours thanks to this Anglo-American invention, of which its claims paternity in France. In the space of twenty years, nearly 200 *chambres funéraires* were constructed, mainly on *PFG* initiative. By adding a monopoly on funerarium operation to their monopoly on services, the *PFG* gained firm, lasting control over the activity in French urban centers.

**The funerarium as a strategic platform**

With the funerarium, tactics for encountering the customer gained in subtlety and the funeral business recovered its customary discretion. The craftsy improvising of the preceding century gave way to much more elaborate facilities and arrangements. The market leaders no longer settled for lying in wait on the probable path of bereaved families; they now began organizing circulation of the departed’s remains.

Until the late 1980s, the absence of strict regulations, the fact that hospitals were in favor of external solutions that would quickly palliate their own lack of facilities, the funeral business’s self-interest in getting in closer to the concentrations of mortality did much to further substitution of private morgues for the public hospital variety. Private funerarium operators were likely to have official agreements with the hospitals: they would free the latter offered in the field of free competition.

(28) The *Pompes Funèbres Générales* company grew throughout the twentieth century by gradually accumulating municipal contracts for performing funeral services; it came to secure 80% of these contracts (2,900 towns and cities) and only ceased growing when the funeral sector was liberalized. Competition around this nationwide leader, which had approximately 1,500 offices nationwide, was atomized. “At the national level, 41% of funerals were handled by a single big company, 46% by the many other, independent businesses.” (Barraud, 1987).

(29) This was of course a *de facto* rather than an official monopoly. The funerarium and related services were not covered by the public-sector monopoly and not included in its concession of a public service, but they were offered in the field of free competition.

(30) See the IGF-IGA-DGAS [Inspection Générale des Finances-Inspection Générale de l’Administration-Direction Générale de l’Action Sociale] “Rapport sur l’organisation du service des pompes funèbres”, 1989. There are several reasons for this convergence. First, concessionnaires, namely the *PFG*, were the only businesses able to make this kind of investment; a funerarium could cost several million francs depending on facility size and comfort. Renewal of the contract by local elected officials justified the hefty investments, since, as mentioned, these mortuary facilities often palliated the public health care establishments’ lack of resources for dealing with the exit from life.
from having to construct and manage their own morgues. (31) Moreover, the funeral operator often made it easier for the hospitals to delegate this responsibility by offering to transfer and shelter the bodies for free. This made it possible to avoid any controversy about the fact that private-sector supply was being substituted for public supply. (32) The tight link between medical and mortuary facilities also involved geographic proximity, even direct integration: the pioneers of funerariums would have been quite happy to build them on hospital grounds. Next best was to install them in the immediate vicinity of the hospital, right outside the exit. This situation was generalized in 1993 when judicial decisions and normative texts stipulated that the two functions and places had to be kept separate. Funerariums thus became a kind of health care institution annex; funerarium workers can immediately get to work handling and treating the cadaver. Keeping it in a refrigerated compartment is both a practical and symbolic supplementary stage in the chain linking treatment with “post-treatment”. Since there is no hospital unit explicitly, exclusively devoted to this end, hospital caregivers readily contact funeral operators to have bodies evacuated. Funeral business staff move freely through the hospital to remove bodies, and take over the task of mortuary bathing, thus relieving hospital staff of handling the deceased altogether.

Located in the immediate vicinity of the greatest concentrations of dead, funerariums are veritable “freeways” for draining cadavers out of hospitals eager to be rid of them. In absorbing the flow of dead bodies that submerge health care establishments, they also collect and channel the deceased’s family, who automatically transit through the place the body has been deposited. The family then need only be guided from the funerarium to the business’s funeral salesman.

The efficiency of these facilities in capturing and channeling the customer is undeniable; the disequilibrium they cause in market distribution is a source of numerous lawsuits between funeral businesses. (33) Funerarium use has led to successive series of regulations aimed at reestablishing a balance between running these facilities and free competition in the funeral business at large (Auby, 1997). The decree of January 14, 1987, and later the law of January 8, 1993, designated funerariums “public utility facilities” that perform a public service; they can therefore legally be run by any local government or state-owned company, by a private enterprise, or by an association, provided these entities are properly certified (Auby, 1997). The 1987 regulations also

(31) “Neither public hospitals nor private establishments have any incentive to rationally develop mortuary supply, because the regulations permit funeral operators to act in place of the families if the latter cannot be reached and to have the body of a person who died in a hospital or other public institution transferred to the funerarium.” (IGF-IGA-DGAS, Rapport sur l’organisation du service des pompes funèbres, 1989).

(32) Funerarium services are paying ones—contrary to public hospital morgues. To prevent hospitals from making untoward use of private funerariums, the regulations specify that any hospital order to have a body admitted to a funerarium is to be paid for by the hospital.

(33) Conclusion reached through systematic study of the decisions of the Conseil de la Concurrence on funeral operators’ appeals to the DGCCRF.
required that funeral agencies be given free access to funerariums. It was not until the law of 1993 and the successive laws for implementing it\(^{(34)}\) that it became compulsory to distinguish strictly between public mortuaires (hospital morgues) and private chambres funéraires. The latters’ capacity for absorbing cadavers primarily benefits those who run them; \(i.e.,\) the funeral operators who, after receiving permission from the public authorities,\(^{(35)}\) consented to make the costly investment of building the facility.\(^{(36)}\)

**The “local barons”**

From one area of France to another, competition structure closely follows the “distribution of resources” for handling the dead. The funerarium has proven an effective means of constituting a *de facto* economic monopoly. The situation of funeral operators under the present conditions of officially free competition is actually not that different from what it was in the past when they enjoyed town monopolies.

Up until sector liberalization, the dominant position enjoyed by the concessionnaire-funerarium operator over the funeral agency further improved. Because funerarium operators compensated for the inability of the public authorities to meet this particular need, they were able to bolster their position as favorite town government partner. The power of these “local barons” of the funeral business was due to 1) their integration in the “treatment” chain, thanks to their facilities and affiliation with the professional worlds of health and death; 2) their excellent relations with the many protagonists linked to public institutions that have a direct role in managing the dead. The close relations between funeral operators, health care institutions, and public authorities were further extended by the close interacquaintance and proximity ties that get made in the funeral-organizing activity. Hospital staff, the police for matters of body identification and traceability, public employees at the town hall and cemetery—all were essential intermediaries when it came to steering the dead and their families toward a particular service provider. Concessionnaires were in direct contact with these public networks, and in this they enjoyed a considerable advantage over their funeral agency competitors. Moreover, there may well have been occasional illegal remuneration of interprofessional exchanges:

The administrative investigation has brought to light that the clientele is being steered toward funeral operator *Pompes Funèbres* X, and that this is organized through payment

\(^{(34)}\) Decree 94-1027 of November 23, 1994; Decree 97-1039 of November 14, 1997; Decree 95-653 of May 9, 1995 fixing national regulations for funeral service businesses.

\(^{(35)}\) The public utility of a funerarium is determined by the municipal and prefectural authorities. The administrative and legal context strictly limits installation of competing facilities in the same area. There are also political lobbying strategies for preventing construction of competing funerariums in a given area.

\(^{(36)}\) The value of this asset is usually between 100,000 and 400,000€ and of course presupposes a heavy investment.
of bonuses to town hall personnel working in such departments as Public Records and construction and maintenance, and to cemetery commissioners, gravediggers, town hall administrative secretaries, and hospital staff. The investigation report notes that these payments are sometimes in return for services actually rendered (administrative services, dressing the deceased...). (Report by M. Paulot on the dominant position of the PF X group, Paris Appeals Court, 1986).

The alliance between these different private and public-sector protagonists in the process of handling the deceased was not due exclusively to bribes or advantages of whatever sort. “Common affiliation” and cooperative arrangements are enough to produce such an alliance, as we shall see further on. On the contrary, corruption phenomena, which occurred primarily during the 1980s, were more common in Paris hospital morgues, i.e., in areas with few funeral homes. Since there was no substitute facility to take over hospital dead in these areas, the morgue became a central interface with the market, and distribution of the dead and their families was fiercely negotiated. Moreover, the ghettoization of morgues within health care establishments is likely to produce a population particularly open to receiving illicit monetary compensation.

“The funeral sector is a local economic market. Despite its total liberalization since abrogation of the town monopoly on funerals, the funeral services market remains a local market structured in large degree by where the dead are, usually the hospital or funerarium.” (Abbadie, 2003). Competition strategies are focused first and foremost on the construction of socio-technical networks; competition in matters of price and quality is secondary. The wide range of fees within a single area attests to the absence of price competition, a situation facilitated by the opaqueness that service providers maintain about service/price equivalencies. This explains why the effects expected from liberalization have been relatively limited. The reformers of the town monopoly system left it up to free competition to “clean up the market” and democratize funerals by bringing down prices. To guarantee success, they linked the lifting of the monopoly to numerous provisions meant to increase

(37) A recent Bulletin Officiel du Conseil de la Concurrence on practices in the funeral services market mentions distribution of year-end gifts by a dominant operator to directors and executive staff of retirement homes, complementary insurance companies (mutuelles), police and gendarmeries, mayors, hospital staff (head nurses, nurses and other). These were considered “ordinary business practices”.

(38) At the time of the town monopoly, concessionnaires themselves were likely to belong to the public networks, as did all state-owned public companies, of course, and Sociétés d’Économie Mixte [combined public-private companies].

(39) Price disparities show up quite clearly in a 1997 study by CRC-Consommation of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of 1,062 estimates from more than 70 funeral businesses. Results: 1) Price differences between two zones range from 0.7% to 36.1%; if differences between zones by product are considered, there is an extremely wide gap in prices of accessory materials such as funeral announcements, bathing fees, a basic funeral urn; prices can be five times higher in one zone than another; 2) analysis by type of product or service shows extremely wide price ranges in all cases.

(40) Due to terminological differences, sales of funeral “packages” including several services, differences in how related services (third-party expenses, marble tombstones, etc.) are counted, it is often difficult to compare estimates presented to customers.
transparency and equip consumers to make decisions. The innovative idea of a “competitive public service” placed under public authority surveillance did not have the hoped-for effects. Since 1993 we have seen quite the opposite: galloping price inflation, much higher than the overall consumer price index. In the field it may be observed that the Pompes Funèbres Générales company has pursued a high price policy, with funerals as much as 30% more expensive than their competitors’ in some locales. Moreover, small and medium-sized funeral businesses [Petites et Moyennes Entreprises] have been building funerariums, an extremely heavy investment for such small structures and obviously not conducive to lower prices.

This reading of competition dynamics enables us to understand the intensity of debates and negotiations between the French state and the professional federations around the legislative clauses of 1999 requiring the rehabilitation of hospital mortuaries. The idea is to redeploy the public alternative to the private funerarium. Hospital mortuaries’ range of services is approximately the same as those offered by the funerarium, but service quality is much lower. They nonetheless are satisfactory for small businesses, who can use the equipment available in these public facilities at a lower cost since they pay no leasing fees. Hospital mortuaries are affecting the industry process for handling the deceased by limiting the proportion of bodies channeled into private funerariums. They thus represent a competitive facility “upstream” of market distribution, and diminish the market leaders’ dominance over small competing agencies. But perhaps only temporarily. Hospital mortuaries are the focus of intense political pressure and their future is highly uncertain.

“Industrial fluidity” at the core of the market

Once the power and effectiveness of this means of market regulation has been recognized, it is important to examine how exactly the customer is channeled and what system mechanisms allow this to happen. We have mapped out the rivers and fairways along which circulate the flows of the dead, “themselves” essential intermediaries enabling a relationship to develop between customers and funeral operators. We also need to identify the “upstream”

(41) Decree 95-653 of May 9, 1995 fixing national regulations for the funeral business. (42) The analysis leads us to identify the following trends: for the 1998-2002 period, funeral service prices rose by 11.4%, less than for the period 1992-1997; after a slowdown in 1999 and 2000, they have been rising at an accelerated rate since 2001. Funeral service prices went up 2.5% in 2000; 2.9% in 2001 and 3.2% in 2002. Funeral service price index trends are much higher than for all consumer goods except tobacco.” (Rapport du Conseil National des Opérations Funéraires, 1998-2002).

(43) In 1999 legislation was passed making it compulsory for all health care institutions with a rate of over 300 deaths a year to have a mortuary that meets standard requirements and a personnel unit for receiving families of the deceased.

(44) Stark decor, hospital-like atmosphere, difficulty getting assistance, limited opening hours. Bodies can be sheltered free of charge in the hospital mortuary for three days only.

(45) Notion borrowed from F. Vatin (1987), who developed it in analyses of forms of industrial organization associated with process industries. The term highlights the centrality of
procedures by which operators make their presence known and get customers sent to them, and the decision-making processes associated with sending the body on its way—in sum, the set of arrangements that work to channel the cadaver and/or structure the encounter between family and funeral business.

One of the ways these arrangements become visible is through complaints made by funeral agencies hoping to interfere in the customer’s fixed destiny and thereby acquire some visibility themselves and begin to exist on the market. Complaints brought before the DGCCRF provide precious evidence of the multiple stratagems deployed by operators in their efforts to capture the dead. These conflicts and their outcome amply nourish our knowledge of the variety of facilities and arrangements involved in organizing the customer’s itinerary while regulating the process. We shall see how the practical discontinuity of social spaces disappears, yielding to a fluid, continuous progression that inexorably leads to a funeral operator. If for dead and living alike in this sector, *la vie est une longue fleuve tranquille* [“life is a long and peaceful river”, the name of a famous French satiric film of the 1980s], this is essentially thanks to the socio-technical networks (Latour, 1989; Vinck, 1999) that connect spaces and create a continuum of action between the different places where the deceased and their families circulate.

“Upstream” of the industry: organizing an “automatic switching” system

The birth of “automatic switching”

“In the central telephone office, the operator herself would connect the subscriber-caller to the person he or she was trying to reach by means of jacks plugged into a switchboard. Automatic or semi-automatic switching was invented quite early, in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1891 in Kansas City, a funeral director, Almon B. Strowger, came to suspect that the telephone switchboard “miss” was sending all calls to his competitor. He developed a system of connecting automatically to the central office. Five years later came the invention of the telephone switch, allowing subscribers to reach the requested number automatically.

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(46) The following quotes are taken in most cases from the preliminary section of case reports, presenting what was observed independently of the DGCCRF ruling. These observations attest to recriminations on the part of funeral agencies against funerarium managers, recriminations which did not necessarily lead the Conseil de la Concurrence to sanction the latter.

(47) Warm thanks to Laurent Menegoz for making this excerpt available to me.
France Télécom, Mémoires pour l’action, 1995, p. 56.

The Kansas City affair is almost as interesting for our undertaker story as for telephone history. The “miss” in question was in fact the wife of the competing funeral service provider, and she was only trying to make sure that the first meeting between supply and demand on the funeral market would take place under what she considered the best possible circumstances.

Funeral operators too attempt to reinvent “automatic switching” from the main scenes in which death occurs, namely health care institutions (hospital, clinic, retirement home) or the deceased’s home, to their businesses. The local market leader in a major urban area managed to get his telephone number working as an internal line in one of the city’s main health care institutions. Funeral operators may also network by telephone with various public intermediaries likely to be in contact with bereaved families:

It was established that 5 of the 55 towns using the Société Anonyme d’Économie Mixte [SAEM]-PF funeral operators did not indicate any other company’s telephone number to their residents in case of demise (telephone number posted in the town hall and communicated to callers in the recorded message). Furthermore, until July 2000, the SAEM-PF enjoyed a direct telephone connection to the Cemeteries and Public Records Office of the town hall of X. (Bulletin Officiel du CCRF no. 2004-09).

Having private-company letterheads printed on mandatory administrative forms is a more widespread practice: (48)

The information letter that the hospitals initially circulated to the families reminded them of their freedom to choose in matters of transferring the body, but it only mentioned the name of the X funerarium and the financial consequences of choosing that destination. The memo in circulation since January 25, 1994, furnishes a list of the main funerariums in the P region. The form requesting transportation of the body before placement in the casket that was used by the hospital until the last trimester of 1994 included the following printed mention: “Request for transport to the funerarium of Funeral Society X.” (Excerpt from the investigation reported in the Bulletin Officiel du DGCCRF no. 8, Tuesday, April 29, 1997; my italics).

For the unpredictable prey represented by persons who die at home, there are the numéros verts (public service numbers) of “SOS décès” printed in the advertising pages of magazines for the elderly. This clearly reproduces the telephone contact method invented by the telephone switchboard miss: calls to “SOS décès” are received directly by a funeral agency salesman.

Material arrangements and arrangements of convenience

As mentioned, the structuring of customer itineraries depends first and foremost on the crowd of professionals who hover around our contemporary dead and decide where they will go. These include the physician who attests

(48) The forms are requests for admission to the funerarium before placement in the casket, and must be signed by the family. Permission is required for transferring the body to the funerarium or outside town limits. These are legal documents furnished by the administration and transmitted by the hospital staff or funeral business employees to the family.
that the person has breathed his last; in some cases the police officer who orders a funeral business to take the body away, the ambulance driver transporting a dying person, the nurse in charge of the health clinic, the morgue orderly receiving bodies.

It has been established that in violation of current regulations, the director of the B retirement home required families to sign a request for admission to a funerarium upon admitting their members to his establishment. Moreover, the manager of this retirement home would only call the ambulance driver of X company. (Bulletin Officiel du CCRF no. 3, Friday, February 2, 1990).

Interventions by these professionals are crucial to market distribution. They may have the classic characteristics of a “prescription”, i.e., transmission of information and knowledge to be used in the process of “qualifying” a service or service provider (Hatchuel, 1995). At the opposite pole, they may involve tacit understandings and, in some cases, corruption of the sort long noted and denounced in this sector. But in many cases they are organized in relation to the decisive constraints involved in regulating the process and managing flows. It is in this connection that outside professional intervention is most directly related to the problematics of customer channeling. This is one area that funeral service operators invest in when organizing the deceased’s itinerary.

In a letter dated October 18, 1999, addressed to the director of X teaching hospital, the director of the PF A funeral home drew attention to the matter of having the body of the deceased automatically sent by X hospital personnel to the funerarium managed by PF B,... and cited the cases of several families who had fallen victim to this practice. The PF A also reported the case of M, whose family had asked for the body to be transferred to the hospital mortuary. The nurses advised the family to call PF B instead: “You should call PF B to have the body transferred to the funeral center; it’s much quicker and we always do it that way here.” (Bulletin Officiel du CCRF no. 2004-9).

Freeing up space, getting the dead out of the way, recovering beds for the sick are the primary concerns of these professionals, whose paths are strewn with dead bodies on either an occasional or daily basis. There is continuous pressure on health care institutions to recover beds. Often a head nurse or retirement home director, concerned to evacuate a body quickly, does not wait for the family’s order but instead directly requests assistance from a funeral operator. In other words, for hospital orderlies, gendarmes and fire fighters alike, getting the body out of the hospital room or public way is first and foremost a specific constraint and professional responsibility, rather than a family affair. For these health and public service professionals, speed, easy coordination, and anything that seems to ensure harmonious joint action are direct selection criteria when it comes to choosing this or that funeral operator. If

(49) When a body is discovered and cause of death is unknown or suspicious, the criminal investigator on site orders a funeral business to take the body to a mortuary chamber or funerarium.

(50) Hatchuel equates the process of purchasing a good or service with deliberating and making a judgment on three features: the object or service acquired, the way it is to be used or enjoyed, how buyers judge what the object brings them in the way of use and enjoyment. The figure of the “prescriber” corresponds to the “third party” whom the buyer turns to to acquire information and knowledge about these three components.
there is any judgment or qualification process, it is constructed in the professional world of the intermediary, not in the customer’s world.

Here again, the funeral operator with a funerarium at his disposal enjoys considerable advantages over his competitors when it comes to responding efficiently to the coordination and logistics constraints of transporting the body. A body cannot be moved from one town to another without administrative permission; this ensures strict traceability by the police.\(^{51}\) The process thus constantly hangs on on-site intervention by a public civil servant with police powers to deliver this permission (mayor, police officer, etc.). The fact is that the main place for checking the authorization papers is the funerarium door. This makes it quite easy for the funerarium manager to temporarily neglect the administrative requirements:

To pick up a body at Clinic A, we have to go get the papers at the clinic, leave the body but take the papers, the three papers signed by the doctor and the family,\(^{52}\) then go back to the [police] station to get permission to move the body before placement in the casket, then go back to get the body once the cop has stamped the document. It’s already taken you three quarters of an hour and you haven’t brought the body in yet. It’s only afterwards that you bring the body to the chambre funéraire [CF]. How can you expect the PF [i.e., the CF manager] to do all that? They do six or seven a day... They make six stretchers a day –you could have a team that did nothing but stretchers. So they go get the papers and the body directly, they admit it [into the CF], no stress, and at the end of the day they bring it all to the [police] office and he puts things in order; “You brought it in when, at what time?...” It’d be impossible for us to do that; we have to do the whole circuit, it’d take us four times as long to pick up the body –that wouldn’t make sense. (Funeral agency director).

To the on-call police officer who would have to get up in the middle of a Sunday meal with his family to put on a name tag,\(^{53}\) the village mayor who would have to visit the deceased’s home in the middle of the night, the night nurse at the clinic waiting for the family to bring her an order to move the body, the funerarium manager offers the possibility of checking correct performance of regulation procedures after the fact:

They’re not going to refuse to take the body if there’s a paper missing. But for us, if we’re missing a paper we don’t get in [to the CF]. That’s the problem with papers, there are too many papers. The family has to sign one, two... already two papers at the time of death, just to get the body moved. So at the hospital it’s going to be a real drag. Already they don’t know what they’re doing; they’re told to get the family to sign the order –often they don’t even do that... The family leaves, they haven’t signed the request for admission, we’ve got to run after them to get them to sign. For them [manager of the CF], it’s not a problem, the family’s got to come back... They’re at an advantage, which is that they don’t follow the rules, they do what they like. They’re not going to not admit the body, that’s the most important thing. (Funeral agency director).

(51) Funeral-related operations such as transporting a body, closing the casket, and burial and cremation are subject to regulation constraints and police surveillance that require on-site presence of state agents (police officers, the mayor); this in turn implies major coordination constraints.

(52) The three papers are a death certificate signed by a physician, official permission to move the body, and request for admission to the funerarium signed by a family member.

(53) To cross town borders, a dead body must be wearing an identity bracelet attached by a police officer (in addition to the other administrative authorizations).
These kinds of arrangements allow the funerarium manager to increase his operational efficiency, remove constraints weighing on the different implicated parties and win their support for his operations in the future (Friedberg 1993). Meanwhile he is ruthlessly hard on his competitors, going so far as to make an ambulance sit in front of the funerarium in the middle of the night until the administrative procedures have been handled. In this first, decisive stage on the path leading from the place of demise to the funerary hotel, “industrial fluidity” is on the side of the funerarium manager.

A space-time continuum that is also a symbolic continuum

In the health care establishment, which is once again the first station on the mortuary itinerary, the deceased is actually at the gate of the funeral market. This representation often remains perfectly theoretical for the main party, i.e., those whom the deceased has left behind and who now have to take care of her funeral. In this economy of circulation, the heterogeneity of professional spaces disappears along with spatial boundaries and temporal discontinuities; everything seems part of a perpetual continuum. But here again, it is the work of the funerarium director to create smooth connecting passages wherever there is danger of the flow being interrupted or the field of possibilities reopened. As illustrated in the preceding quotation, the operator in this substitution game is very likely to wear “two hats”.

Let us look again at how the deceased is transferred from the health care institution to the funerarium. As mentioned, physicians, orderlies, and even the family themselves often see it as a godsend to have someone who will take charge of the body immediately. From hospital room to private funerarium, no one (least of all the entity to be moved) wonders about the discreet passage from the first of these chambres to the second. Doffing their dark suit for an orderly’s white coat, funeral business employees stage a symbolic continuum between the hospital ward and the funeral service: “My mother saw two people dressed in white arrive with a stretcher. She thought they were hospital staff. They put the body on the stretcher and took it away. She didn’t understand that it was the funeral operator, and that my grandmother was being taken to the funerarium. The orderly later explained to her that they couldn’t keep the body in the clinic”, (54) recounts a young woman questioned about her choice of an operator.

By shifting the entry onto the market from the hospital to the funerarium, the funerarium manager covered the better part of the distance separating him from his customers. His welcoming shingle, hanging above the entrance to the funerarium, is immediately seen by families coming to identify or visit the body. And as master of the house, he can easily play on the spatial contiguity, role interchangeability, confusion in ways of signaling to the customer where

(54) This particular clinic has a small mortuary, but no staff assigned to run it. It was therefore much easier for the clinic to call in a private structure.
she is, and thereby unite the two professional spaces; i.e., the public-service funerarium and his private business. The two share a receiving area, a receptionist for meeting the families, and a telephone line, which inexorably leads a lost customer trying to locate his relative into contact with a funeral salesman. Though a competitor may have managed to obtain the family’s patronage, the counselor-salesman on the funerarium premises is very likely to intercede with the family to make a competing offer, win its custom, and get a contract drawn up and signed on the spot. The golden rule for a competing funeral agency that has obtained the family’s order to move the body to the funerarium is never to let that family go there without having organized the funeral:

[Given that] a visit to the grounds brought to light the intermeshing of funerarium premises and those of the business operation that the PF X has set up there, and that the mere indication “Office” posted on the door makes it impossible to distinguish between the two (even though the door was closed) . . . [Given that], as indicated in an internal memo dated March 4, 1991, which is perfectly unambiguous about the desired goal, competing businesses were forbidden to use the fax machine to confirm date and hour the body was moved, and the refusal to make the usual means of communication available by discriminatorily forcing competing businesses to send an employee to make the required confirmation, the aim was necessarily to make the exercise of competition more difficult. (Bulletin Officiel du CCRF no. 21, Friday, November 20, 1998).

Competing funeral agencies, which can do no better than glean the few crumbs not gobbled up by this de facto monopoly, regularly take their cases to court. Once in a while, the state orders a happy funerarium manager to erect a wall, sandblast a glass door, dissociate two telephone lines, employ two distinct receptionists. To disjoin, disunite, separate—normative policy tries to restore physical boundaries and heterogeneity of spaces in places where the funeral operator is playing instead on a “fade in-fade out” effect. The regulations have sought to give minimal visibility to competing agencies inside the funerarium by requiring the manager to post a list of funeral operators—without specifying that the list ought not to be hidden behind a flowering plant.

Restoring alternatives, organizing a fork in the road where there is now only one way to go, opening up the field of possibilities—this is what is at issue for funeral agencies being kept off the well-trodden path on which circulate the dear departed, immediately followed by their bereaved families. To the funeral agent’s need to acquire visibility must be added the precariousness of his “attachments”. If he lets a body get moved to the funerarium, not only is he in danger of losing the customer’s custom but he exposes himself to the many coordination constraints that the funerarium manager can impose on him:

Q: Can they do anything to degrade the quality of service you provide when using the funerarium?
No.... Well, yes. They can put us in the ugliest salon, and they can give us the worst hours for the ceremony; that is, 8 in the morning and 5 in the evening. That’s about it. Or the bathing hours. Yes, if they want to give us a hard time, it’s their funerarium, it’s their place. “You say you’d like to get the body admitted in the morning? Well there won’t be anyone here then so you’ll have to come back between 12 and 2.” That’s it. (Funeral agency director).
When leasing funerarium facilities, the funeral agent is at the mercy of the funerarium manager for salon availability, body-receiving hours, access to the preparation room, presentation of the body by funerarium employees. Here as elsewhere industrial fluidity and service quality are based on a number of cooperative arrangements made in the course of daily activity, arrangements that it is very much in a competitor’s interest not to be implicated in. While sociology of work and organizations has long taught us that exchanges are at the heart of cooperative activity (Dodie, 1995; Friedberg, 1993), sociology of the market immediately reveals the strong relevance of cooperative activity at the heart of competition dynamics.

**Hyper-coordination and commitment**

We are far from having grasped the infinite variety of the customer-steering arrangements and devices that funeral service professionals are so expert in. But we are now sufficiently familiar with this grammar of market coordination to try to qualify it more precisely.

The work of framing and channeling circulation is at the core of this capture-the-customer system. By following the deceased and his family, we discover the multiple wellsprings for formatting circulation itineraries: techniques for getting the customer to the business (automatic switching, ways of letting one’s presence and services be known to potential customers), spatial-temporal flow channeling (spatial proximity, speed of intervention), encompassing of heterogeneous products or services (public records/sales; caring for the dying/caring for dead bodies), symbolic continuity (white coats), exchanges and cooperative arrangements among the many protagonists of the activity, and more generally the close link between distinct professional spaces (hospital room –funerarium– private-sector business). The fluidity of the sequence is crucial and is created by “hyper-coordination” (Thrift, 2003); that is, the configuring of socio-technical arrangements that condition “positionings and juxtapositionings”.

While the material architecture of this channeling activity is essential, it is also crucial to get the many intermediaries within the circulation network “on board”. These “upstream” intermediaries are the police officer, the hospital orderly, the morgue employee who encounter the dead before the funeral operator does. In reference to market structuring, economic sociology is wont to call these intermediaries “prescribers” (Hatchuel, 1995); i.e., figures active in the process of “qualifying” products. But here they have an even more essential attribute: for one reason or another they are situated directly on the path that bodies and/or families circulate on, and they are also in charge of regulating the management and flow of that circulation. Special cooperative arrangements with particular funeral operators are developed first and foremost to serve the imperatives of coordination and flow management.
“The economics of goods [biens] yields to the economics of social ties [liens]” (Callon et al., 2000, p. 238). The main concern in competition in the funeral sector is to stabilize the socio-technical networks mobilized in the process. The strong pull of the funerarium, a crucial facility in the service relation, means that it is hard for alternative ties to exist; i.e., ties other than those that ineluctably get established with funeral businesses on the spot—including afterwards, since, as we have seen, these operators are in a position to lower the quality of their competitors’ service.

The “captivating” impact of these techniques for encountering the customer is also linked to their ability to produce “commitments,” in a sense similar to that explained by Howard S. Becker (1960). The deceased (reduced to silence), the family caught in an emergency situation, the hospital orderly in a hurry to get rid of the body—everyone involved is quickly sucked in by the funeral professional’s activation of a socio-technical capacity tightly adjusted to the constraint system triggered by death. Customer commitment is first and foremost practical: it reflects the fact that the trajectory of the deceased is likely to be determined by socio-technical devices. Once the dead person, through no will of his own, has been started along this framed itinerary, no reopening of the field of possibilities (if only in connection with the family’s conscience) is enough to reactivate the market game. Because the service relation—understood as the means of allotting means for handling the deceased—comes prior to the drawing up of a business contract, that relation produces the commitment. Any alternative procedure would require the customer to pay a considerable extra cost. It would mean declining the service provider’s offer after that provider had already actively put himself in one’s service. It would mean paying off what one owes so as to go off in search of another provider, explore the alternatives, go around the business (often with other people), make oneself available to go through another 45-minute interview (at least) with another funeral counselor, and possibly miss out on an offer that one might actually choose now that one is an informed customer, and so forth.

From the health care institution to the funerarium, from the funerarium to the funeral business premises: the means for bringing customer and provider into relation with each other may be said to follow the sequential career model dynamic that interactionists like so well, or the self-reinforcement processes favored by “path-dependence” theorists: “In path-dependent sequences, the key mechanism at work is some form of self-reinforcement or positive feedback loop. Initial moves in a particular direction encourage further movement along the same path. Over time, ‘the road not chosen’

(55) Becker relates the notion of “commitment” to the effect of initial decisions or actions taken in a given context that already require a particular line of conduct, a sequence of situations, a “career”: “It seems convenient to retain ‘commitment’ to refer to the specific mechanism of constraint of behavior through previously placed side bets, and use terms such as ‘involvement’, ‘attachment’, ‘vocation’, ‘obligation’, and so on, to refer to related but distinguishable phenomena.” On the notion of commitment as a line of action consistent with an initial action, see also Johnson (1973).
becomes an increasingly distant, increasingly unreachable alternative” (Pierson, 2000b, pp. 74-75). Initial acts or choices determine a line of action – with the qualification that on the funeral market the weight of the determination is rigorously orchestrated by the market actors.

Regardless of whether funeral businesses station themselves at the entrance to the town hall or cemetery or at the hospital exit, they are there to meet customers who will not come visit them of their own volition. Lying in wait at path intersections, formating the customer’s circulation itinerary, appropriating the body in order to capture the family that goes with it, organizing “industrial fluidity” by providing a tight weave of heterogeneous entities – these are all ways of substituting a pretraced path toward a single operator for the complexity of customer judgment in a business competition situation.

Understanding how a market is organized therefore means paying close attention to how customers circulate on it, the socio-technical devices that anticipate and structure their itineraries, the symbolic-material arrangements that create the pretraced paths of the market encounter. Studying competition strategies and conflicts among funeral operators on local markets puts us in direct contact with a mode of organizing the supply-demand relation that is different from the classic one of calculation and qualification as defined above. The arrangements and equipment implied in this market relation, at least those that structure the process by which the customer is put into relation with a service provider, pertain not so much to a process of judgment as one of customer channeling. In this system, government by the socio-technical networks associated with the process, particularly upstream of the industry, represents a strong means of constructing a dominant position on the market.

Clearly the import of these arrangements and equipment extends beyond the funeral market. Their weight is particularly heavy in the organization of that market relation because the customer is caught up in an economy of time, indeed urgency, and is also quite willing to be relieved of the cognitive labor of identifying and ranking competitive offers. These devices and arrangements are full-fledged components of the market dynamic. Their performance is due first and foremost to their capacity for organizing the scarcity of encounters between customers and service providers (Callon and Muniesa, 2003); i.e., for replacing the space of market choice with operations that steer the customer along a particular path.

(56) In reviewing the relevant economics and political science literature, Pierson redefines the analytical foundations of the “path dependence” concept, relating it to social processes founded on an “increasing returns” dynamic. He then uses this key to understand the main phenomena of political life (collective action, institutional dynamics, political authority, power asymmetry, etc.).
This reading suggests the value of developing conceptual categories that allow for analytically specifying the different mechanisms at work in the construction of the market encounter, namely around the distinction between orchestrating qualification and orchestrating commitment. In the first, the key mechanism in the process by which buyer and supplier meet develops around defining the properties and qualities of the object to be exchanged. In the second, it is accomplished through constructing and reinforcing the irreversibility of the initial choice (Pierson, 2000a). This proposition presupposes being more attentive to micro-sociological versions of “paths of dependence,” paths that participate in the dynamic of market organization, for it is such micro-sociological study that provides access to the infinitely diverse devices and arrangements by means of which market actors structure sequential processes, produce the inertia that precludes the play of alternatives, find ways of dealing with the laws that govern paths of dependence; i.e., the critical, performative role of initial sequences, the centrality of spatial and temporal factors, and the weight of coordination in the socio-technical networks adjoining the production process.

Pascale Trompette

Centre de Recherche Innovation Socio-technique et Organisations Industrielles – CRISTO
Université Pierre Mendès-France
Domaine Universitaire-BP 47
38040 Grenoble Cedex 9 – France
pascale.trompette@upmf-grenoble.fr

Translation: Amy Jacobs

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