

Cultural Propriety in a Global Marketplace

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As an exercise in cultural criticism, the biases of this chapter should be quite evident. The chapter springs from an anthropological interest in marketing and consumer behavior, but pretends to be neither social scientific nor managerial in its perspective. Historian Jean-Christophe Agnew (1984) has proclaimed that to demand a "thick" description of the symbolic world of goods "is to open vistas of interpretation that are almost vertiginous in their potential complexity" and to "threaten the classic linear movement of historical narrative" (p. 69). Following Ulin's (1984) hermeneutically inspired insight, I have drawn my comments from the encounter between consumer and analyst that represents a commonly neglected, culturally communicative frame in its own right. The multivocal richness of "consumption" and "culture" is explored in this chapter, while marketing is examined as an intervention strategy promoting a particular idea system.

Marketing: A Culture-Critical View

Keegan and MacMaster (1983) advise us that there are three major paradigms for approaching world markets: assumptions about the nature of world markets, orientations toward international business, and planning and execution of designs. It seems to me that these first two models are often implicit and infrequently examined in any truly reflective way. The third paradigm is more readily discernible in practice, and provides us with the data from which the first two models of an individual, a company, or a country can be inferred. It is from my experience of this third model, as a consumer, a marketing analyst, and a social scientist, that my remarks about the first two paradigms derive.

Elsewhere (Sherry 1987a), I have described marketing as perhaps the most potent force of cultural stability and cultural change at work in the contemporary world. This potency stems from the same dynamic tension that animates

the old saw deciphering the Chinese ideogram for "crisis" into its components of "opportunity" and "danger." Without forcing the metaphor, a critical correspondence between "marketing" and "crisis" can be discerned at the level of culture. Marketing has alternately been praised for averting and damned for creating many of the crises plaguing humanity. Marketing strategies that are bold and successful are often charted along the fine line between opportunity and danger. It is this fine line to which we must turn in any discussion of cultural propriety. Without scratching too deeply beneath the multivocal surface of his profound observation, we can resonate with Gerard Manley Hopkins' insight:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Whether or not we will witness the same hopeful outcome of such searing that Hopkins affirms:

And for all this, nature is never spent

depends upon our ability to harness the forces of hyperindustrial society to humane ends. The cultural consequences of and marketing responses to this searing are explored in this chapter.

Levy (1976) has written eloquently of the "fallacy of composition"—a phenomenon he has detailed as the synechdochic mechanism—by which marketing has become stigmatized. The nature of the degradation has its roots in antiquity and is intimately bound up with the ambiguity of the enterprise (the opportunity/danger complex, if you will) as reflected in Levy's foray into etymology: neutral or positive root ideas such as *mercari*, *mereri*, and *merere* are used to form words such as mercenary and meretricious. In her ideological defense of commerce, Vlahos (1985) treats us to historical and cross-cultural descriptions of the ways in which merchants are villified even as they are valued. She cites the Reformation as a sort of watershed, wherein businessmen could "come into their own," which they seem to have done by skillfully manipulating their ambivalent status. In his discussion of trade diasporas, Curtin (1984) views commerce as among the most important stimuli to cultural change, and merchants as privileged strangers, the point men of intercultural communication. In pressing for opportunity, merchants are at once dangerous and endangered.

In fascinating cognate studies, Brown (1947) and Agnew (1979) have explored the ways in which language, as a map of culture, can enhance our understanding of marketing behavior. Etymologically, the ancient market-

place is a *limen* or threshold. It was situated in the ambiguously neutral periphery between settlements and hedged about by ritual safeguards; the site could alternate between marketplace and battlefield (Agnew 1979). The market site was demarcated as sacred ground by boundary stones and was presided over by the god Hermes. The god of the boundary stone became the god of trade, as merchants became professional boundary crossers. Over time, Hermes became a trickster, a thief, and a herald, each a marginal identity under whose aegis the class marginal to society at large—merchants—plied its trade. For Brown (1947), Hermes symbolizes the new commercial culture and the ethic of acquisitive individualism. From the twelfth century, when the term *market* first entered the English language, to the late eighteenth century, we witnessed the gradual separation of the generality of the market process from the particularity of the market *place* "which accompanied the historical change in productive and distributive relations: the historical appearance of exchange-value as a perceived or half-perceived social form distinct from and alien to the natural form of the human artifact" (Agnew 1979, p. 109). In encouraging us to read beyond Marx's "mystifying language of commodities," Agnew draws our attention back to the "problematic threshold of exchange": the material and social geography of the market culture (p. 116).

The moral landscape of this geography is difficult to tend. As Macfarlane (1985) observes, the root of all evil in a Biblical sense is also the root of all good in Adam Smith's sense: the market principle. Market capitalism, in eliminating absolute moralities, ushered in a "world of moral confusion" in which "private vice, passions and interests have merged into public goods" (Macfarlane, pp. 73–74). Contemporary marketers have inherited this problematic geography, and have aggravated the paradox by uncritically exporting a culture they have in large part shaped. This culture of consumption may be inimical to the lifeways of its prospective consumers, an antagonist rather than a synergist to humane development. Both Douglas (1966) and Turner (1967) have alerted us to the social power with which boundaries are invested, and to the peril and promise inherent in crossing these boundaries. The greatest challenge currently facing marketers—the globalization crisis—is to transform the danger posed by consumption to the world's cultures into opportunity for cultural pluralism to thrive.

The Culture of Consumption

Through the confluence of a number of ecological, social structural, and ideological factors over the past five hundred years, contemporary Euro-American societies find themselves inhabiting and further elaborating a culture of consumption. This culture is characterized by a high-intensity market mechanism (Leiss 1976) and an insupportably high level of energy consump-

tion (Bodley 1985). Within this culture, individuals are encouraged to interpret their needs exclusively as needs for commodities, which fosters the dynamic between expanding gratification and frustration that infuses everyday life with meaning (Leiss). Consumer culture has been characterized as an ethic, a standard of living, and a power structure, each of which encourages individuals to equate commodities with personal welfare and, ultimately, to conceive of themselves as commodities (Fox and Lears 1983). Consumerism, viewed here as a social pathology which has become the dominant worldview, is an improvised alternative to other traditional cultural forms that imparted aesthetic and moral meaning to everyday life (Bellah et al. 1985). The social construction of scarcity produces some profound dilemmas for individuals and societies guided by an ideology of insatiable want and unlimited growth (Leiss). The modern social idiom (Fox and Lears) is corporate and therapeutic: social control is achieved by an elite able to subordinate notions of "transcendence" to those of personal fulfillment and immediate gratification.

The idea systems of which culture is composed contain ideologies structuring our perceptions of the system as grounded in the essence of the universe, so that our cultural perceptions become natural perceptions (Wolf 1982). In our Euro-American business-cultural tradition, the shift from merely using goods as markers to create intelligibility and make stable the categories of culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), to the shaping of epistemology and praxis by commodity fetishism (Taussig 1980) has occurred virtually outside of our conscious awareness (Dholakia and Sherry 1987). Thus, we view as "natural" (and, therefore, beyond enlightened reflection) the creation and expansion of a system based upon ideologically and technologically ethnocentric factors. Further, "consumption" is viewed as therapeutic, curative, and, therefore, universally desirable. Traditional, positivist, "progress"-centered idea systems of the type espoused by Levitt (1983) become global "meta-products" of this culture. The consumption ethic driving this culture (indeed, overconsumption may be both the defining feature of and ultimate threat to the culture) accelerates the evolution of high-energy societies whose industrial adaptation is ecologically unstable at the expense of low-energy societies whose preindustrial adaptations have proven stable for half a million years (Bodley 1982, 1985). As Wolf (1982) has shown in his meticulous examination of world system dynamics, trade has rendered obsolete all conceptions of culture save that as process, while rendering all cultural boundaries permeable. Clearly, it is critical that we examine the processing we accept as natural for its impact upon ourselves and others.

Consumption has become a "hegemonic way of seeing" in Euro-American culture (Fox and Lears 1983, p. x). Consumption has become a form of social control cross-cutting culture, politics, personal and social identity, and the economy (Ulin 1984). Enlightened self-interest suggests that we must "free the processes for satisfaction of needs from their tendency to become exclusively

oriented to the blandishments of the marketplace" (Leiss 1976, p. 126). Divesting ourselves of "theological attitudes" toward market mechanisms (Toffler 1983) is an apostasy not easily launched; proselytizing in its service is fraught with danger. Expressing his concern that a diverse environment is essential to human life, Dubos (1968) laments that "the creeping monotony of overorganized and overtechnicized life, of standardized patterns, will make it progressively more difficult to explore fully the biological richness of our species, and may handicap the further development of civilization" (p. 93). Berry's (1977) study of U.S. agriculture is only one timely validation of this concern.

The Consumption of Culture

Within the context of the culture of consumption, a trend of considerable significance may be discerned. This trend has been labeled the consumption of culture, and it appears to have two distinct dimensions which turn upon the multivocal richness of its major terms. The first dimension concerns "culture" and its complex penumbra of meanings (Worsley 1984). The manner in which culture has been transformed into a commodity, or experience into a product, is worthy of discussion. The second dimension concerns "consumption" as it is used to connote alternately a using (or a using up) of a product and a progressive wasting (in the sense of pathology or morbidity). Culture consuming warrants close consideration.

Culture as Product

Since the time that C.P. Snow (1959) recognized and lamented the gulf between the two cultures of science and the humanities, we have witnessed a dishearteningly rapid balkanization of experience. Cultures and subcultures of every style and hue have proliferated despite the attempts of individuals to unify and aggregate traditions. Worsley (1984) remarks that all historic usages of the term *culture* constitute a "family of overlapping meanings which direct our attention to society as a whole and insist that it cannot be reduced to the economic or the political." For Worsley, culture is the realm of "those crucial institutions in which the ideas we live by are produced and through which they are communicated" (p. 59). Worsley has proposed four ideal type conceptions of culture which serve nicely the purposes of the present chapter. *Holistic* culture is the whole way of life of a people. *Elitist* culture is a superior set of values reserved for the few. *Hegemonic* culture is a set of behaviors imposed upon a majority by those who rule. *Pluralist* culture is a relativist construction encompassing distinctive behavior codes and value systems in communities

within the same society. Each of these cultures is touched by the phenomenon of consumption.

Defamiliarization and decomposition plague holistic culture as the commodity form moves outside of its "traditionally designated enclaves" to become a complex material symbolic entity (Agnew 1984). In Agnew's phrase, commodified cultural symbols become infinitely polyvalent as the "fluid medium of the mass market dislodges the meanings we have always expressed through and attached to our artifacts" (p. 71). Advertising then must recontextualize and refamiliarize these attribute bundles in the commodity environment (Agnew 1984). This transmogrifying process has been referred to as "cultural commoditization" (Greenwood 1977) and "commodification" (Westbrook 1984); it is particularly apparent in the tourist industry. Its analog in the service sector has been called the commercialization of feeling (Hochschild 1983) or "emotion work." In his indictment of the promotion of "local color" as a part of tourist merchandising, Greenwood (1977) argues persuasively that local culture may be expropriated, and its bearers exploited, when activities are altered and evacuated of traditional meaning in the service of marketing. The destructive conversion of authentic, efficacious cultural forms into "local color" over which tourists have rights occurs worldwide, from Haight-Ashbury to Harajuku, from Baffin to Bali.

Cultural commodification abounds in advertising, where we may view Papuan chief Wopkaimin sport a Pentel pen in place of a nosebone, learn how one anthropologist's encounter with Central American natives resulted in Dr. Juice One Drop Fish Scent, or hear a black minstrel extol the virtues of Darkie Toothpaste. When market research revealed that Aussie-persona Paul Hogan would prove too popular with the Japanese, plans to launch a campaign to lure Japanese tourists to Australia were scrapped until the local infrastructure could be strengthened (*Advertising Age* 1985a). German-language posters advertising comic books by Walt Disney Productions, Inc., mistakenly placed in the town of Neuchatel, Switzerland, were defaced by the local French-speaking populace, whose city council in turn issued a formal protest to the offending agency (*Advertising Age* 1985b). Such anecdotes are legion.

Elitist culture has been a benefactor of the consumption ideology despite the perennial (and spurious) conflict between so-called high culture and popular culture (Gans 1974). Increasingly, individuals are devoting themselves to the consumption of experience, variously construed, in implicit affirmation of the bread-and-circus paradigm. It has been argued (Kelly 1984) that the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption has been displaced or rerouted from the orbit of goods to that of experience. Increasingly, status may accrue to those who "do" rather than to those who "have"; incorporeal property will become an even more significant marker. Products designed to capture or reify incorporeal property—photographic and video equipment, for example—might be expected to boom. The consumption of symbols in the form of arts (through

galleries, theaters, symphony halls, etc.), sciences (through museums, institutes, seminars, etc.), nature (through park services, conservatories, expeditions, etc.) or human potential (through encounter groups of various incarnations), and the conversion of experience to commodity may be expected to accelerate. The *Chicago Tribune* runs a weekly "Culture" column featuring an art marketplace. Salvador Dali made his advertising debut in Spain in June 1985 with an outdoor board campaign promoting Spanish arts and an interview in which he claimed that the only truly outstanding admen in history were Jesus Christ and himself (Specht 1985).

Cultural Imperialism and Pluralism

Examining elitist culture in relativist perspective, we might best see it as one pole of a continuum of "expressive culture" bounded on the other end by "folk culture." In this perspective, specific experiences analogous to the ones cited for elitist culture may be discerned at every point along the continuum; while these experiences may be status-linked, we can divest them of any supposed intrinsic superiority or inferiority. Thus, so-called popular cultural phenomena—cinema, spectacle, sport, and any other medium of symbolic expression for mass consumption—qualify as examples of cultural consumption. The middle-aged exjock who pays to attend a baseball camp directed by his current and boyhood sports idols consumes experience at a level comparable to the season ticket holder enraptured by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

A discussion of hegemonic culture moves us into some of the darker dimensions of the ideology of consumption. Hegemony can be built into "the very mutual expectations and practices of material activity through which people produce and reproduce social life" (Ulin 1984, p. 165), as may be obvious from the conception of culture taken from Wolf (1982). The high-energy, high-market-intensity culture of consumption appears to institutionalize processes of cultural imperialism, homogenization, and degradation. We see increasing diffusion of products, life styles, values, and modes of production and consumption designed for and perfected in Western industrialized nations to societies where the social utility of these items is questionable (Kothari 1984; Kumar 1980). Whether "progress," "development," or "nation-building" are invoked as catalysts to this diffusion, the results are often unanticipated and harmful.

Cultural imperialism—or structural imperialism in Galtung's (1971) more precise phrase—is the label used by critics to describe the shaping of one culture to suit the ends of another. The consumption ideology is one form of cultural imperialism. The diffusion of American TV shows which allegedly glorify greed and immorality by local standards—"Dallas" or "Dynasty," for example—to Third World nations is one manifestation (Cote 1984). The South Korean government's protest of direct broadcasting signal spillover from Japan

is another (*Advertising Age* 1984). Cultural homogenization appears crucial for the continued growth of the world capitalist system (Dagnino 1980), and cultural autonomy of communities is at odds with nation-building attempts where diversity is equated with disunity. The net impact is cultural degradation in the forms of desertification, deforestation, forced migration, and urbanization in the service of development as conceived by elites (Kothari 1984). The subversion of entire cultures, such as the Miskito of Nicaragua, through engagement with hegemonic cultures, is a tragically common occurrence (Bodley 1982). The transformation of our own in the face of contemporary business practices—the “mallings” and “chaining” of America (Kowinski 1985; Luxenberg 1985)—is receiving renewed attention.

The effect of the consumption ideology on pluralist culture is difficult to gauge. It is tempting to discern a resurgence of individuation, of a form midway between reactance and revitalization, among cultures through which consumption ideology has diffused. Octavio Paz (1985) asks whether we are witnessing “the historical vengeance of particularisms” in the unrest of former colonies. Creative integration of Western products into local consumption use-systems indicates the ability of cultures to adapt and reframe their meaning-systems, permitting a kind of syncretism between “modern” and “traditional” to flourish. The rich cultural mix of nations such as Israel force alterations in the way the consumption ideology may be implemented (Brooks 1985). Domestic market fragmentation in the United States may shape and reflect the formation of subcultures seeking forms of satisfaction currently unavailable in the culture of consumption. The sheer bringing together of peoples of different traditions through such mass migrations as tourism or industrial relocation—themselves a function of consumption ideology—encourages pluralism.

The Future of Hyperindustrial Society

Polar perspectives of the future of culture are represented by the ethics of unfettered capitalism and entropy (Harris 1981). The former would fuel the ideology of consumption, the latter would attempt to smother it. Proponents of each viewpoint predict global disaster if their opponents’ philosophy carries the day. Between utopian and dystopian visions is a projected practopia (Toffler 1980, 1983) to be achieved by some fusion of paramodern and paraprimitive solutions. How might such a practopia be realized?

We live less in a postindustrial society than in what Harris has termed a “hyperindustrial” society. In this society, the processes and dimensions undergirding industrial capitalism are intensified, accelerated, and translated into the service/information sector. The nascent self-care movement in which Toffler (1980) embeds the prosumer (i.e. the actively producing consumer) of his

projected third and postindustrial wave, and which will alter the role of the market in social life, is perhaps an incipient revolt against the consumption ethic. However, the sociopolitical and technological support required to launch prosumption as a popular ethic and achieve the conversion from consumer to prosumer society will have to be massive; that the invisible hand will require considerable help is an understatement (Toffler 1983). The conversion will require the voluntary abdication of the ruling consumer elite, and the restructuring of all of the institutions of thought control in the culture of consumption. A more likely scenario is a gradual shift from a holistic consumer culture to a pluralist culture in which prosuming enclaves may be able to find a niche. Such small enclaves would resemble the societies of ethnographic record which epitomize Toffler’s first (preindustrial) wave. Whether these enclaves will become millenarian movements or models of maze-way reconstruction is impossible to forecast. Whether or not the United States is returning to the values the prosumer never left remains to be seen. If republican democracy poses a threat to the culture of consumption (Westbrook 1984), how much more strongly will a first wave reaction be resisted?

In their “guided tour through the badlands of modern culture,” Montagu and Madsen (1983, p. 215) have asserted that our fate hangs by the thread of moral recognition. They call for a countercultural remaking of society, claiming that sapience is insufficient to meet the challenge: the marriage of thought and feeling is required to break through to a new and higher consciousness recovering “the lost world of fellow feelings” (p. 220). This recovery implies a recognition and rejection of commodity fetishism plus a redefinition of consumer behavior. It is time for consumer researchers to explore the shapes that Toffler’s projected transmarket civilization might take and for marketing practitioners to envision ways of implementing the fruits of that research.

Seeking Synergy through Syncretism: The Key to Cultural Propriety

Returning to our original notion of merchants as boundary crossers, it is apparent that marketers have much to contribute to the remaking of society. While they may make no pretensions of being social architects or engineers, they do deal in the very stuff of culture change: diffusion of innovation. Further, while people can be encouraged to borrow indiscriminantly, they are more likely to benefit from borrowing that which will mesh with their own cultural patterns. Arensberg and Niehoff (1964) have documented the reworking and reinterpreting of newly borrowed ideas, techniques, and products that enable them to be integrated into local cultural patterns. In their discussion of the rush to globalization—a trend apparently resolving a bit more rationally to regionalization (Sherry 1987b)—Dholakia and Sherry (1987) have advocated

a more humane, decentralized approach to marketing intervention which is less reactive in responding to unanticipated consequences and more proactive in assessing holistically the potential impact of such intervention upon society. Marketers, as privileged strangers, are historically disposed toward local needs assessment and technology transfer (if we consider resources "tools"). Thus, if marketers can relearn literally and figuratively to step outside of the culture of consumption and identify culturally specific, culturally relevant needs, they will be better able to identify, develop, and promote solutions to these needs which are culturally appropriate. Resources that embody such solutions can be considered preadaptations in that they contain traits that can enable them to exploit new or changing environments and on which new adaptations can be built. This hidden advantage of advance preparation—structural, functional, or symbolic properties of a resource that suit it to more than one consumption-use system—is more likely to be discerned if the marketer recognizes that the flow of synergy is multidirectional and that syncretism is the key to synergy.

Syncretism is the grafting of a newly introduced cultural element to a currently recognized cultural element. This element may be as complex as an idea system or as straightforward as technology; in most marketing instances, these elements are fused. The elements to be united may be complementary or conflictual. While syncretism is often a long and serendipitous process and often as well a defensive local reaction to hegemonic culture which results in cryptobehavior and pseudoconformity, it can be a carefully planned and managed enterprise as well. Such care can only be exercised if the marketer has a thorough understanding of local principles of categorization and evaluation as they relate to the consumption-use system. Authentic synergy will result only when it is recognized that consumption innovations can also flow from South to North, from low-energy to high-energy cultures, from third world to first world, and from one product category, organizational structure, or research discipline to any other.

Marketing is more than a preeminent medium of intercultural communication. It is a program of directed intervention which must engage and overcome barriers at the cultural, social, psychological, and physical levels to provide a resource that is compatible with—in that it may complete or transform—a local consumption-use system. Too often, this directed intervention has been short-term and concerned primarily with purchase or repurchase behavior. It needs to become a longer-term proposition concerned more with social impact assessment, forecasting, and authentic synergy. The marketing concept we espouse domestically, which all too often assumes a production orientation internationally, must be transmitted to an ecological perspective with a global provenance.

Marketing, as popularly conceived and practiced, may well need to be demarketed. At the very least, its technology of influence must be channeled to the service of cultural pluralism. Berman has observed that industrial society—

capitalist and socialist—officially strives for homogeneity in thought and behavior. Hyperindustrial society has accelerated this monomania:

Systems that are reduced in complexity lose options, become unstable and vulnerable. Flexibility in personality types and world views provides, instead, possibilities for change, evolution, and real survival. Imperialism, whether economic, psychological or personal (they tend to go together) seeks to wipe out native cultures, individual ways of life, and diverse ideas—eradicating them in order to substitute a global and homogeneous way of life. It sees variation as a threat. A holistic civilization, by contrast, would cherish variation, see it as a gift, a form of wealth or property. (Berman 1984, 264–65).

Social marketing, the bastard offspring of our dominant idea-system, must be legitimated as a first step in achieving cultural propriety and as a foundation upon which we can construct a more satisfying life.

Cultural propriety is the marketing of resources appropriate to the needs of a local culture. It is segmentation written large and cast in an ethical idiom. It is motivated by an intimate, locally rooted understanding of lifeways and a profound respect for the integrity of traditional social structures. The guiding rule of such a marketing strategy, as in any ethically invasive procedure, is *primum non nocere*: first do no harm. In the rush to globalization, the preservation of local culture has been considered primarily as an opportunity cost. If cultural integrity is epiphenomenal to business practice, splendid; if not, social disorganization is frequently the cost of progress. Clearly, this view must be drastically tempered. The preservation of boundaries, with its promise of continued diversity and a perpetual role for marketers, may be the most evolutionary significant contribution that marketing can make to cultural ecology.

The analogy with which I began this chapter has now come full circle. Cultural hegemony is the "danger" of our idea-system; cultural pluralism is the "opportunity." The vehicle I have advocated for mediating these dimensions of "crisis" is cultural propriety. Through carefully managed syncretism, the synergy required for a humane cultural evolution can be generated. Whether marketers can be persuaded to adopt this perspective remains to be seen.

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Philosophical and Radical Thought in Marketing

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1987



Lexington Books

D.C. Heath Company/Lexington, Massachusetts/Toronto