The Ethnographer's Apprentice: Trying Consumer Culture from the Outside In

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ABSTRACT. Anthropologists have long wrestled with their impact upon the people they study. Historically, the discipline has served and subverted colonial agendas, but views itself traditionally as an advocate for the disempowered and as an instrument of public policy. Marketing is now among the pre-eminent institutions of cultural stability and change at work on the planet. Currently, ethnography is assuming a growing importance in the marketer's effort to influence the accommodation and resistance of consumers to the neocolonial forces of globalization. The ethical consequences of market-oriented ethnography are explored in this essay.

KEY WORDS: anthropology, consumerism, ethnography, globalization, marketing

> CORPORATION, *n.* An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility.
>
> Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Let me disclose and disclaim at the outset of this essay. I am an anthropologist, and not an ethicist. I am at once a vocal critic of and enthusiastic participant in the culture of consumption I describe in these pages. As a

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professor of marketing and an industry consultant, I advise students and clients how best to accommodate and resist this culture. I believe that an ethical approach to marketplace behavior is possible and necessary, but my grasp of such an approach more resembles the Buddhist parable of the blind men and the elephant with each recounting. Depending upon which horn of a dilemma I grab, I sense a snake, a column or a granary, as my (mis)understanding shifts with each new purchase. That's why I've adopted such a punning title for this effort.

I provide a personal account, through the prism of my experience as a disciplinary interloper, of anthropology's engagement with the marketplace. The ambivalence of my home discipline has increased, as ethnography has become a current methodological darling of the market research community. My opening epigram captures this anthropological ambivalence. For better and for worse, marketing has become perhaps the greatest force of cultural stability and change at work in the contemporary world (Sherry, 1995). Elsewhere (Sherry, 2000) I have claimed that the problems caused by marketing are best solved by marketing, and that such mitigation might be well informed by ethnography. This is a minority viewpoint in my tribe. A tribe that rightly fears abetting the rise of a "great imperium with the outlook of a great emporium" (De Grazia, 2006, p. 3).

As Hill (2007) has succinctly surveyed marketing's critique of itself, my goal in this essay is a bit more discursive. I begin by erecting an anthropological platform for the staging of ethics, and launching an ethnographic sortie from the badlands of marketing. I then examine consumer culture as a phenomenon of eutopic as well as dystopic proportion, and assert that market-oriented ethnography can refine both our grasp and command of moral geography. I look to

Scandinavian social science in particular for inspiration into enlightened intervention. I close with some anthropologically informed suggestions for managing consumer culture. Throughout this essay, I strive not to reify this culture, as its lived experience is wildly variable across and within individuals.

Anthropology

A quick click through the web site of the American Anthropological Association (n.d.) will provide the casual browser with enough of an inkling to surmise that the discipline might be fraught with ethical complications. The holistic study of all things human in comparative perspective by ecumenical method is a fair definition, if not a felicitous description, of anthropology. Practitioners use sociocultural, linguistic, biological and archaeological orientations in their quest for understanding. They track phenomena across time and space. They employ social scientific and humanistic methods to produce idiographic and nomothetic accounts. Hybridity is hardwired into the enterprise. Given the multidimensional nature of the undertaking, whether you employ either a CIP spreading activation or CCT rhizomatic model of meaning management, it is clear that an ethical nightmare awaits the hermenaut. Headhunting and cannibalism. Cliteridectomy and hymenoplasty. Fraternity and sorority hazing rituals. Insider trading and backdating. Nutraceuticals and cosmeceuticals. How are we to tell rite from wrong?

For brevity's sake, the elements of anthropology most linked to ethics can be reduced without great violence. Anthropologists are consumed with the issue of agency, and driven to consider the degrees of freedom enjoyed by individuals in the face of cultural ideologies and social institutions. Whether construed as free will or behavioral latitude, the relationship between individuals and power structures is a focal concern. Advocacy is a second, and related, vital element. The anthropologist experiences an intense identification with informants, and speaks, in an ironically proprietary way, of "my village" or "my people." Often, this population is disempowered, disenfranchised, marginalized or under threat, and the anthropologist becomes a countervailing force in social relations. This imbalance becomes more problematic as we begin to "study up" (Nader, 1972).

Activism is a third crucial element bearing upon ethics. Applied anthropology has a long history of involvement in public policy issues, in war efforts (both pro- and anti-), in human rights campaigns and other civic spheres (Caplan, 2003; Edel and Edel, 1968; Hill and Baba, 2006). The classroom itself has long been a radicalized, experiential forum.

Finally, anthropology has traditionally been concerned with the negotiation of authenticity (having tracked, once upon a time, the devolution of "folklore" to "fakelore," and thence to "fakelure"). The constitution of the true, the genuine, the real, the authoritative, the pure or pristine, and the quest for an Ur-type touchstone of cultural integrity have been elusive disciplinary preoccupations into the present moment. Understanding the distinctive, irreducible "x-ness" of x is only gradually being tempered by notions of hybridity and creolization that acknowledge the change that is as foundational as stability.

In the context of consumer culture, these elements give rise to perplexing questions. How do cultural models of desire become internalized, and how are they performed by individuals (Shweder, 1991)? Can I speak of "my client," "my company" and "my segment" as I have of "my people?" How can community-level consumerist commitment (for example, in directed intervention approaches to hypertension, substance abuse, HIV-AIDS and other conventional "targets") be leveraged on a global scale, and mobilized in the service of other complications and sequelae of consumer culture? What is the nature of authenticity in a mass- and supermediated environment? How authority is exercised is anthropology's ethical challenge. At issue is the nature and legitimacy of social control. How ought power to be wielded? By what right do we intervene in a culture? The sheer writing and publishing of an analysis is itself an intervention. Who benefits? How are the life chances of "my people" affected by my work? I broach the nature of anthropological authority momentarily.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the deep understanding of the lived experience of people as it unfolds in a particular cultural context, and the representation of that

understanding in ways that are faithful to that experience. An effective ethnographic account of behavior is not only cognitively enlightening, but also viscerally evocative. It is sensual and cerebral. Perhaps most significantly, it is both method and representation. Insight and understanding inhere in the actual crafting of the account. The typical ethnographic toolkit includes the following methods and techniques: archival analysis, trace analysis, participant observation, interview, photography, videography, and projective tasking. As ethnography spreads to the virtual realms of cyberia and cyburbia, netnography becomes a favored approach (Sherry and Kozinets, 2001).

Again, for brevity's sake, the wellsprings of ethnography can be located without excessive displacement. Immersion is one fountainhead, and depends for its vitality upon the naturalistic observation of and prolonged engagement with informants. Immediacy is a second fountainhead, catalyzed by emergent design, hermeneutic or iterative analysis and progressive contextualization. Intimacy is a third fountainhead, which gives rise both to maximized comparisons and sensitized concepts, and allows intraceptive intuition to thrive; the ethnographer is in effect the research instrument. Finally, insight is the fountainhead that gives ethnography its distinctive pay-off. Understanding is privileged over explanation in this regard, and generalization takes a back seat. A grounded theory is offered in interpretation of a phenomenon (Sherry and Kozinets, 2001).

I have found two notions developed by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins – inscape and instress – to be of particular efficacy in describing the nature of ethnography. Inscape is the essence of an entity sensually apprehended and rendered in description (Everett, n.d.); it is the unique, differentiated quality of that entity. Instress is the ineffable experience of the beholder occasioned by the inscape that flouts description (Peters, 1948); it is the resonance we feel in contemplation of inscape. Effective ethnography rigorously captures the former and authentically approximates the latter in representation.

In ethnographic inquiry, ethics and epistemology are thoroughly and consequentially imbricated (Caplan, 2003), as I hope my drive-by summary has suggested. I leave the exploration of the workbench level of the enterprise for another occasion, in favor

of turning now to the cultural consequences of market-oriented ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

Collision of professional and commercial conceptions

Commercial iconography invokes images from ethology (e.g., *Business Week* paraphrasing Diane Fossey to depict the intrusive capturing of the strange familiar ways of Consumers in the Mist), colonialism (e.g., *Fortune* caricaturizing Bill Gates in a pith helmet suitable for "pygmy hunting" to describe Microsoft's acquisition practices) and voyeuristic lab science (e.g., *Business Week* dramatizing the "Science of Desire" with clipboard-wielding omniscient observers surrounding a cross-sectioned household) to describe market-oriented ethnography. Consumer ethnographers often describe their activity as the innocuous practice of trend spotting, cool hunting, code busting, and shadowing. Academic critics describe the iniquitous consequences of these practices variously as Coca-colonization, Disneyfication and McDonaldization (Flusty, 2004; Ritzer, 1995; Sherry, 2005). They find the spectre of the swooshtika to haunt the global marketplace, which promises to metastasize into a homogeneous brandscape. Internet bulletin boards find novice anthropologists conflating the work of the intelligence community with that of marketing firms and departments, and questioning the ethics of market-oriented ethnography.

Popular and professional images of market-oriented ethnography emphasize the outsized outcomes, whether commercial or cultural, of mundane methodology; the killer app of apparently retro research results in abidingly right responses to consumer wants, and dysfunctional adjustments to cultural life. Magic, both benevolent and malevolent, is attributed to the method by its champions and critics alike. This attribution nicely anticipates a discussion of marketing as a bridging mechanism between ethnography and consumer culture.

Marketing

In 2005, the American Marketing Association Board proposed a current definition: "Marketing is an

organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders." This is a profoundly disappointing definition, anthropologically speaking, as my entire preceding discussion would suggest.

Marketing is understood clinically to include the strategy and tactics involved in creating and sustaining the variables that have traditionally comprised its mix: product, promotion, price and place. Periodically, the number of variables has been adjusted upward (to include, for example, politics and public relations, etc.), but the core four remain foundational. Marketing's theatres of operation have usefully been described by three dichotomies (Hunt, 1977): positive, profit and micro, versus normative, nonprofit and macro. The former cluster has been most scrutinized and pursued, the latter relatively neglected.

Anthropologically, marketing is more comprehensively understood as an exercise in behavioral engineering, insofar as it involves the shaping of the experience of others (Levy, 1978). Marketing is a semiotic enterprise (of the firm and the culture) that deals in the currency of meaning. It invests all that it touches with significance, provides a projective field that encourages consumers to become co-creators, and promotes a particular construction of reality that complements and contradicts those of other social institutions. It functions both as a panacea and a pandemic. As a font of material and metaphysical provisioning, it solves problems. As the principal cultural fan that inflames desire, marketing increases dissatisfaction and arouses anxiety, thereby creating problems. Marketing giveth, and marketing taketh away.

Ethical challenges posed by consumer culture

Critics contend that marketing (and, of late, ethnography, as a willing co-conspirator) has culminated in an ethos best construed as a culture of consumption. I have described consumer culture in this fashion:

> This culture is characterized by a high-intensity market mechanism (Leiss, 1976) and an insupportably high

level of energy consumption (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, 1976). 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, 1976). The modern social idiom (Fox and Lears, 1983) 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 (Sherry, 1987).

Encouraging us to imagine ever fewer opportunities to escape the market, producing local cultural dislocation in the wake of its adoption, and inviting marketers, consumers and activists alike to conflate consumption, politics and identity, consumer culture is alleged to efface anything that stands in its path.

Ethical milestones and millstones

Anthropology has been rocked by a reflexive revolution that has unmoored its identity. The discipline has grappled with a colonial past for which it has had to assume a righteous share of culpability (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). It has sought to redress its colonial shortcomings in its activist engagement of an imperial present (Caplan, 2003). As an intellectual tradition, the discipline faces an uncertain future. Over 50% of anthropologists are now employed outside the academy (Hill and Baba, 2006). This makes for a provocative and ironic trajectory: half the field is enmeshed in understanding and criticizing a world the other half is actively creating, the latter employing knowledge generated by the former to effect cultural change.

A chorus of critical voices has arisen to goad the discipline into a more activist posture. The indigenous

outcry of aboriginal commentators has reverberated on the global stage. The minority backlash of ethnic, feminist, and other coalitions has chided the discipline at home (Caplan, 2003). An ascending punditocracy of poorly informed celebrities (the Huntingtons, Friedmans, Kaplans, D'Souzas and others) poaching on well-defined but ill-defended anthropological turf draws attention to the absence of a public anthropology capable of promoting civic debate of integrity and rigor (Bestemen and Gusterson, 2005). Given the current vitality of public theology (Heyer, 2006), a public anthropology should surely flourish.

Finally, the postmodern moment that has moved through the discipline has wreaked havoc on conventional ontology, epistemology, and axiology. With the exaltation of skepticism, the foundation of anthropology has changed utterly, and its core tenets are being renegotiated. Positive and normative directions of individuals, as well as those of the discipline, seem up for grabs (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Nowhere is this ambivalence felt more forcefully than in our assessment of consumer culture.

Space limitations preclude an exhaustive inventory of the criticisms anthropological critics have leveled against consumer culture. They recognize that most of the regnant economic literature on consumption is long on creative destruction, but short on destructive creation (Nelson, 2006). Economists generally contend that economic development occasions some undesirable side effects, but they accept the enlightenment mantra that material progress breeds moral progress (Friedman, 2005). A short laundry list of grievances would include the following indictments. Contemporary capitalisms are hegemonic in nature, and promote cultural homogenization (Greider, 1997; Wallace, 2005); this massive reduction of diversity is considered both morally reprehensible and evolutionarily maladaptive. Globalization constitutes the enrichment of the core and the immiseration of the periphery (Kinzer, 2006; Sherry, 1983). Ethnocide is waged via systematic cultural dislocation, and the spread of iatrogenic diseases integral to development (Appadurai, 2006). Ecocide is perpetuated through pollution and climate change (Ridgeway, 2004). Materialism elevates acquisitiveness to a cultural syndrome, and the continued democratization of luxury promotes the endless escalation of insatiable want (Farrell, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1999; Whybrow,

2005). Spectacle fosters distraction and complacency, encouraging a compliant citizenry (DeZengotita, 2005). Consumer debt arises through and reinforces dysfunctional socialization and promotes a kind of indentured servitude (Williams, 2004). And so forth.

Marvin Zonis (a University of Chicago economist) has quipped, "The good news is, the market has won. The bad news is, we don't have the faintest grasp of a social philosophy to animate, monitor or inspire this market" (Marty, 1999). His use of the pontifical "we" is both refreshing and disturbing; it underscores the limits of economics as a moral vision. It also highlights the need for comprehensive anthropological understanding of consumer culture that is as long on empirics as it is on criticism.

Another quick visit to the web site of the American Anthropological Association reveals the discipline's historical commitment to and careful consideration of ethics. Anthropologists recognize a responsibility to those studied (people, animals, and materials), the public, the discipline, scholarship and science, students and trainees, sponsors, and home and host governments. In an attempt to ameliorate unintended or unanticipated consequences of their work, they propose, insofar as is humanly possible, to inform people fully of the positive and negative consequences of their research involvement, to secure and renew their consent and constantly remind them of the voluntary nature of their participation, to preserve their anonymity and debrief them effectively. Transparency of findings is mandatory. And, above all else, anthropologists propose to do no harm, in perpetuity. They commit to an autocratic IRB's fondest dream, in principle, but negotiate ethical execution on the ground.

Practitioners of market-oriented ethnography have aided in the development of an adapted anthropological ethical code that actually makes their managerial practice possible. The National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (n.d.), whose rise reflects both the flight to the private sector of the academically disenfranchised and the growing recognition of the paucity of anthropological inquiry into production, let alone consumption, has labored for years to create such a hybrid position. In so doing, the group demonstrates just how inextricably bound up with epistemology and politics ethics is. The NAPA

guidelines have not been incorporated into the AAA's code of ethics, despite much debate in the home association. This bellwether activity suggests that an alternative view of consumer culture is emerging, and that it requires ethical anthropological engagement.

Interpretive summary

Applbaum (2004, 2006) has made a cogent critique of the role of market-oriented ethnography in determining the limits of marketing action, which I summarize brutally in this paragraph. Applbaum mounts a critique of the theory of latent needs, denying that unarticulated needs exist beneath conscious awareness and claiming that research techniques function merely to construct an abstraction of needs. While market-oriented ethnography may be less hubristic (but more fraught with ethical complications) than other techniques, it still simply reinforces the fetishism of needs. He discerns an apparatus of "marketing capitalism" driving the system, such that remedial or enlightened education fails to impact firms, consumer culture gets exported around the globe, and the apotheosis of marketing brooks no competing ethos. Marketing promotes a totalizing view of humans as consumers with limitless insatiable wants, reduces satisfaction to the exercise of choice in the free market, and touts unfettered market competition as the royal road to innovation. From this energetically implemented worldview arises my cursorily culled catalogue of shocks that flesh is heir to.

Net net, Applbaum advises the anthropologist not to yoke the ethnographic imagination to the juggernaut of marketing. His judgment captures academic anthropology's majority view. While he states these opinions authoritatively, assertions they remain, in face of existing research and in the vacuum of additional research desperately in need of undertaking. His stance on the manifestness of needs, the intractability of corporations, and the moral complexity status ascribed to ethnography, as well as his elision of equally totalizing and perilous institutions, prematurely discourages consideration of a strong rival hypothesis.

An alternative take on consumer culture

Let's widen the aperture of our critical lens to capture the full range of social mechanisms of thought control in the postmodern era. Consumption then assumes a different shape:

> Consumers build material and symbolic environments with marketplace products, images and messages. They invest these environments with local meaning. The fetishistic and totemic significance of these environments largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the modern world. These phenomenological realms are brandscapes. This investment process is innate to our species, and is no more (if no less) ideologically freighted than any other of our socializing institutions. It is the very stuff of cultural stability and cultural change (Sherry, 2005).

Consumption thus becomes another vehicle of immanence and transcendence, a different but no less viable route than those offered by religion, art, politics, or science, another door of perception thrown open in pursuit of apotheosis.

Consumers are neither cultural dopes nor cultural dupes. They are not passive recipients of the marketer's offerings (Zukin, 2004). Consumers actively co-create; they help produce consumption (Myers, 2001). They transmute shopping into a devotional ritual, a labor of love (Miller, 1998). They appropriate from the market, ripping and riffing like innovative bricoleurs. Marketers in turn re-appropriate these authentic or populist innovations, sending the wheel around again. Far from being mere victims (which, of course, they sometimes are), consumers engage in a range of resistance against the market. A brief inventory is telling. Perhaps the most basic manifestation comprises information-seeking, -exchange and -use, its most current incarnations visible in the spread of brand communities and the growth of social investing. Conventional consumerist activism continues apace, in such forms as protests, boycotts and buycotts, and the proliferation of ngos, igos and their hybrids (Princen et al., 2002; Tarrow, 2005). Participating or guerrilla consumerism is rampant as well, and is reflected in such phenomena as monkey-wrenching and culture-jamming, and in temporary autonomous zones such as the Burning Man Project, Rainbow

Gatherings, and Mountain Man Rendezvouses (Sherry, 2005). Lifestyle, subculture and affinity group formation is yet another form of resistance, as witness the rise of cultural creatives, voluntary simplicity communes, bioregionalists, ecofeminists, and prosumers. Whether unmaking marketing through hyperconsumption or remaking it via conscientious consumption, consumers push back at every opportunity.

The Scandinavian suggestion

New hope for the ethnographic inquiry into the ethical nature of consumer culture is emerging in the Nordic countries, which have forged a distinctive type of capitalism over the decades. First, let's reset our understanding:

> Existing research on consumption fails to register the full complexity of the practices, motivations, and mechanisms through which the working up of moral selves is undertaken in relation to consumption practices. Academics, policy-makers, and campaigning organisations understand ethical decision-making in particular, often highly rationalistic ways. This is the case even when understandings are broadened out from narrow economic rationalities to consider the relationships between consumption and identity, where one still finds strong presumptions of the relationship between consumption, knowledge, and an actively reflexive self (Barnett et al., 2005).

The moral geography of consumption remains to be explored in as rigorous a fashion as any other subject of social scientific or humanistic inquiry. Our ethical pronouncements may coincide with our active and vigorous empirical inquiry, but they should not occur in the absence of such inquiry, and certainly should be subject to revision as our empirical understanding improves (Lieven and Hulsman, 2006).

Further, our growing understanding of consumer culture can be harnessed in a revitalization movement that encourages the active re-appropriation of culture through the use of the very stuff of the marketplace. The political consumerism movement emerging in Scandinavia proposes just such a course:

Political consumerism is defined as the actions a person performs when he/she shows substantial value considerations in connection with deliberately choosing or avoiding goods in order to promote a political goal. According to this definition green or ethical consumption is not necessarily political consumerism. What motivates consumer behaviour is crucial...Political consumerism is a result of strong political interest and trust which means that the market mechanism is considered as a supplement to and not a downright replacement of the institutionalized political system (Andersen and Tobiasen, 2001: 12, 64). If this is true, it does not support Beck's (1997: 98) implicit hypothesis that political consumerism is a kind of sub- and counter-politics based on a critical attitude towards modernity, the consequences of industrialization, man-made risks, and the role of the State. Apparently, political consumers are very interested in politics, and they want to support and not to counteract the institutionalized political system. Political consumerism may therefore reflect the endeavours of post-modern citizens to re-capture the "ecclesia" by rebuilding the "agora" which is the third and intermediate sphere between the public and private spheres where communication between the two takes place (Bauman, 1999: 107) [Jensen, 2005].

Jensen's observations illustrate the ways in which interpenetrating social institutions can be employed to help transform consumer culture in an emancipatory fashion. This is perhaps nowhere more "visible" than in the blogosphere and in brand community chat rooms, where data and sentiment commingle, cross cultures and catalyze behavior, both despite and because of the marketer's ability to harness discussion.

At the risk of citation overkill, I offer Jensen's (2005) insight into the pragmatics of ethical consumption as a bridge to my concluding comments on the use of ethnography in facilitating transformation:

> Rather than assuming that ethical consumption is a self-reflexively conscious practice set off against non-ethical consumption, we start by assuming that everyday consumption practices are always already shaped by and help shape certain sorts of ethical dispositions. Thus, we propose that everyday consumption is *ordinarily ethical*, in two senses. Firstly, if 'ethical' is taken in a Foucauldian sense to refer to the activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct, then the very basics of routine consumption – a concern for value for money, quality,

and so on – can be understood to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies. Secondly, and following from this, consumption is ordinarily ethical in so far as it is a set of institutionally and technologically mediated activities that practically implicate selves and others in ethical relations prior to any conscious reflection (O'Neill, 105–106: 2000).

If, as Ted Levitt has claimed, the job of the marketer is to give consumers not what they say they want, but what they really want, I can imagine no more effective or ethical tool of empirical discovery, managerial insight, consumer satisfaction and public policy import, than ethnography. We might strive to create a more satisfying culture in our drive to understand it.

Conclusion

Can the dirt anthropologist and the consumer ethnographer be reconciled? What can the apprentice recommend as far as either the diagnosis and treatment of consumer culture syndrome and/or the guidance of a consumer culture revitalization movement is concerned? How best can he advise both sides of the aisle in his role of scholar–practitioner? I have a handful of suggestions.

Anthropology as Advocatus Diaboli

In its questioning of the consequences of applied research, anthropology must be reflective, not just reflexive. Criticism should incorporate close reading into evaluation and judgment. Thick description and deep interpretation should accompany critique. To play devil's advocate for economics and marketing is necessary but not sufficient; the home discipline must be carefully scrutinized as well. Here I'm stumping for a judicious exercise of cultural and ethical relativism. Cultural relativism posits a kind of incommensurability between cultures that demands engagement and dialogue in the crafting of interpretations (Rosalso, 2000). Ethical relativism entails a conditional suspension of judgment, so that the sociocultural and historical context of a phenomenon's origins can be accounted for, appreciated and factored into anal-

ysis (Sahlins, 2002). Neither of these relativisms amounts to advocacy, and neither demands that ethics be based on cultural universals. Each requires careful empirical inquiry to support subsequent judgment. In practice, a consumer ethnographer may accept consulting assignments from the pharmaceutical industry, but decline offers from the alcohol and tobacco industries; she might enthusiastically assist in the development of an export platform for the work of indigenous artisans while resisting the intrusion of ecotourism into her peoples' world. Either of these choices is best facilitated in a disciplinary climate of committed inquiry, where a holistic understanding of consumer behavior as it actually occurs and ramifies is rigorously pursued.

Cultural ecology of marketing

There is a foundational need for a thorough understanding, achieved through meticulous ethnography, of marketing, that analyzes each of its material, organizational, and semiotic ramifications throughout cultures. A cognate call must also be launched for basic and applied research into stakeholding. Our insight into marketing requires broadening beyond the focus on buyers, sellers and public policy makers to the entire range of actors affected by marketing transactions. Levy (1976) has long called for the creation of a discipline he calls marcology, that would undertake this heroic task, and which would contrast with marketing the way that biology contrasts with medicine. Such an intellectual inquiry could be housed in anthropology, whose ecological habit of mind (if not its prejudicial predisposition against business) is better suited to such comprehensive coverage than its commercial cousin, whose principal concern traditionally has been clinical practice.

Diversified dissemination

The era of disciplinary silos has persisted far beyond its usefulness. Consumption is such a pervasive part of culture, and marketing such a powerful engine, that the understanding and shaping of consumer behavior is best not delegated to any sole field. The

culture of consumption is best unpacked in inter-disciplinary, multimodal fashion. Proprietary, academic and popular constituents should each be addressed in our ongoing scholarly efforts to interpret and direct consumer culture. Careful ethnographies, radical manifestoes, artistic treatments and other vessels of understanding should be employed to fullest effect. Each of us might commit to the seminar as a way of life, so that teaching moments do not go unrealized, and proselytize for the engaged, organic intellectual apprehension of the culture around us. A periodic and public reflective unpacking of my own ambivalence as a consumer (or as a marketer) is usually all I need to get the ball rolling.

In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II reminded us of the urgency for a deeper inquiry into consumer culture that might direct us from a lifestyle devoted to having to one devoted to being, and emphasized the cultural grounding of ethics (Marty, 1999). Understanding this having/being dialectic is a priority for market-oriented ethnography. Especially, whether as an article of faith or as a consequence of economic process, we find that the poor will always be with us, since, pace Hill (2007), some modicum of having is essential to a dignified being. Whose modicum is an anthropological assay. Like a doctor who must incorporate diagnosis into the treatment plan, consumer ethnographers intervene as they understand, and understand as they intervene. Criticism and conscientious consumption are each best served in this simultaneity of practices.

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