

The Marketing Reformation Redux

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In several recent essays (Sherry, 2008a, 2008b), I have confessed my ambivalence as an ardent critic and willing concelebrant of consumer culture, and professed my dual allegiance to disciplines that are at once pure and applied. I chair a department that has adopted a marketing-and-society positioning. A proponent of the consumer culture theoretics (Arnould and Thompson, 2007) represented in this volume, I have taught my students how to accommodate and resist both the globalization of markets and the marketization of life. I have trained managers and been an active industry consultant for almost three decades. I have practiced and researched social and commercial marketing as an insider and an outsider. Working both sides of several streets, I have cultivated the same sense of skepticism our authors bring to bear upon the fundamentals of our discipline, as theorized and practiced. That skepticism has been sharpened in the reading of their insightful work, and I look forward to deploying it in my next projects, whether teaching, research, or consulting. With these biases in mind, the reader may take the following remarks with a grain of salt.

The contributors to this volume have explored the terrain on the frontier between critical and reflexive marketing. They are concerned to revise marketing's understanding of itself, not just as a technology of influence but as a means of apprehending and recreating the world. They address marketing as an ideological screen and a cultural force, a well-intended but impoverished philosophy with egregiously unanticipated consequences. The unexamined assumptions embedded in our theorizing and the unreflective translation of theory into managerial practice compromise comprehension and intervention alike. Wholesale employment of methodologies ill-suited either to intellectual or practical challenge further compounds the confusion. To prevent marketing from becoming a juggernaut, remaking experience in its image, our authors have recommended a re-engineering by insiders, sensitive to the

shortfalls and promise the discipline embodies. In savoring the fruits of their labor, I have tried to extract just a few seeds from which the hybrid vigor of our enterprise might be improved.

In the following few paragraphs, I parse the collective wisdom (and, in many cases, borrow the language) of the volume's contributors into the convenient categories of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and praxis. The nature of what we know, the manner of our knowing, the values underlying our knowing, and the implementation of that knowing are treated separately for expositional convenience, even though they are ineluctably interconnected. They pervade the chapters of this book in different combinations and measures, and will be familiar to the reader. I begin by hectoring the insiders with a summary question in each domain that has arisen in my engagement with the ideas the authors have furnished.

Ontology

Can we discern and harmonize the interpenetrating ideologies, relationships, interactions, and material that direct life to prevent a cultural hijacking?

The dethroning of grand narratives in the postmodern moment has done little to discourage pretenders in the present era. Sacred and secular world-views, once presumed consecutive and discrete, are revealed to be fused in our era (Latour, 1993) and profoundly shaped by the political at all levels of operation (Foucault, 1970). The corruption of religion and science are equally likely as ideologies are translated into practice.

We seem to be leaving an epoch that has witnessed a shift from what sociologists have called the medicalization of deviance to the medicalization of life (Szasz, 2007), and entering another in which theorists (Heath and Potter, 2004; Moore, 2007) claim to be increasingly unable to disentangle marketing from culture. Public and commercial forces are not simply colliding, they are being interwoven in a common fabric. The consequences of this weaving are contested by our authors.

Marketing is both a barometer and a pressure front in respect of cultural ethos. All elements of the marketing mix shape and reflect culture, society, and personality. Marketing is thoroughly imbricated in everyday life. Given this fundamental enmeshment, and both the unanticipated and unintended consequences of the marketization of life, it is imperative that we learn to think systemically about marketing, using as many holistic frameworks—without automatic recourse to the still useful Marxian infrastructure/structure/superstructure model latent in our authors' efforts—as we can muster in the enterprise. Whether we call it marcology (Levy, 1976), agorology (Mittlestaedt, 2006), or cultural ecology (Sherry, 2008b), understanding all the

ramifications of the interrelations between stakeholders and (im)material in the aggregate marketing system (Wilkie and Moore, 2006) must become a priority for theorists and practitioners.

The relentlessly adaptive radiation of brands to ever newer niches requires renewed consideration. As brands become magnets and beacons (McCracken, 1988, 2006), totems and fetishes (Sherry, 2005), and, ultimately, pilgrimage sites (Diamond et al., 2009), life appears to become absorbed into their auras and orbits. It is clearly time to rethink our conception of the consumer, insofar as the notion obscures both the extensive productive and extra-economic activity in which the actor is engaged.

And let us rethink “community” too. Especially the kinds of moral community that exist at the intersection of economy, ecology, and cultural ethos. It is here that the moral philosophies of hazard, panic, and accountability arise and interact, forcing us to reconsider fundamentally our notions of obligation. Our overlooking of the environment both natural and built—in conceptualizing and implementing marketing has returned to haunt us. Renewed attention to infrastructure and material culture, and to sources rather than resources, promises to help us reform marketing in a radical fashion.

Epistemology

How can we encourage a habit of inquiry that matches methodology to research question rather than vice versa, recognizes the inherently interdisciplinary and hermeneutic nature of understanding, and promotes respect across paradigmatic boundaries?

While the tyranny of paradigms is no longer the scourge it was even a decade ago, the academic discipline of marketing is still hampered by a disproportionate reverence for positivist methods. Our managerial kin have been more pragmatic, adopting most of the approaches advocated by the paladins of the postmodern moment of the late 1980s, further refining many of the tools and creating new ones as well.

With the flourishing of consumer culture theoretics, and the discovery of consumer behavior across an array of disciplines (social sciences as well as humanities) contiguous to marketing, the hegemony of economics and psychology as dominant discourses is being vigorously challenged. In an ironic turn, the rise of “behavioral economics”—at once a legitimate, if belated hybridization of social sciences and a defensive retrenchment in service to the status quo—promises to affirm much of the so-called “interpretive” work that has preceded it. It is time, as Grant McCracken (2009) has proclaimed, for a Chief Culture Officer to ascend to the C-suite, for academic counterparts to edit more marketing journals (in the tradition of *Culture, Markets and*

Consumption), and for marketing adepts to influence social science outlets (such as the *Journal of Consumer Culture*).

Our authors draw upon an impressive assortment of methods and perspectives in their inquiries. Archival analysis, historiography, ethnography, and survey are each employed to enlightening effect. The disciplines of anthropology, cultural studies, history, sociology, semiotics, and logistics are brought to bear upon the re-conceptualization of marketing. The sampling frames employed are also quite distinctive in comparison to conventional marketing inquiry. A wide selection of temporal eras and cultures is represented in the book, which is another pleasant contrast with the tempo- and America-centric foci that orient the field.

The essay format observed by the authors is itself an interesting and impactful departure from the journal article template that acts as a constraint on creative discovery, a kind of straitjacket ensuring formulaic conformity, ostensibly in the service of efficiency. The essay permits greater recognition of and ethical exploitation of the awesome power of rhetoric in the creation of meaning. That writing is a foundational dimension of knowing, that the text is not merely a vessel of knowledge conveyance but a method of generating insight and understanding, is too infrequently acknowledged in our field. While there is a vibrant subaltern tradition of scholarly book publishing (and a brisk one in text and trade books) in academic marketing, this effort has been lost to most of the field, even if it has inspired some path-breaking research on the margins. Ironically, much marketing insight has diffused to contiguous disciplines through books rather than journal articles, given both differing reward structures and misperceptions at work beyond our field.

Axiology

Given that the legal is not always (or often) the ethical, should needs (vs. wants) be placed beyond the reach of the market, in some restricted sense?

Oscar Wilde once observed: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (1910: 27). Wildean cynicism might hold that marketers know the price of everything and the value of nothing. The chapters in this volume are shot through with the moral significance of marketing. From the apparently perversely self-defeating ideology of marketing humanism, to the shift toward a stakeholder- and service-dominant perspective of marketing, even our most benign efforts to relieve the discontents of everyday life with a spoonful of strategic planning are fraught with peril. As an intellectual discipline and a

managerial practice, marketing is the envisioning of, and questing for, Utopia (Maclaran and Brown, 2005). It is arguably the paramount utopian force at work in the world today. If marketers are the chief cartographers of this enterprise, such misplaced pre-eminence exacts a moral toll. Whether it involves something as massive and exteroceptive as retheorizing our conception of nonethnocentric development (the promotion of appropriate local utopias), or as primal and intrareceptive as articulating an authentic self, moral geography demands to be renegotiated. These choices stem from the values the discipline embraces.

Value polarity between competing world views (marketing, science, religion, politics, etc.) is exceedingly difficult to reconcile. Polarity that may exist within a world view may be impossible to resolve without significant compromise. For example, our ostensibly honorable consumer-centric philosophy of marketing seems to conflict with an apparently more generative and sustainable socio-centric orientation. Giving the consumer what s/he really wants (pace Levitt) may ultimately be harmful both to consumer and society. Giving social considerations priority over individual ones seems paternalistic in the best case, and autocratic in the worst. If marketing humanism is to be rehabilitated, the "debate" between private gain and public good must be staged in every venue of enculturation and cultural production. Debate must be as pervasive as the influence it enshrines; we must "commit to the seminar as a way of life, so teaching moments don't go unrealized" (Sherry, 2008b: 93). This means moving the discussion beyond seminar rooms, lecture halls, and the research pods of cubicle land, and into the precincts of everyday life. We might begin with conversations around the electronic hearth, in all its manifestations, as we all lead super-mediated lives. The yoking of any cultural cynosure such as play (the heir to the sacred in commerce) to marketing should always be a cause for deep reflection and public discussion.

Perhaps all marketing must become social marketing, and the template imposition reversed. Demarketing? Yes, demarketing (Kotler and Levy, 1971), via re-envisioned marketing (Sherry, 2000). Before profitable brands enter their conservative financial phase, perhaps they should be held accountable for producing social value in their dynamic creative phase. Both centripetal and centrifugal forces should comprise the brand's energy (Mish and Scammon, 2010). As marketers discover/create segments, a social impact assessment might be demanded, and social permission marketing enforced. Viewing research simply as a proprietary exercise in exploration or confirmation is so idealistic as to be naïve.

Praxis

How can we best negotiate beyond constraints (or low expectations) placed upon us by clients (commercial and noncommercial) to deliver uncommon value?

Our authors make it abundantly clear that slippage occurs across all stakeholder activities, and, in those cases where it can actually be said to be motivated, may spring from either benign or malign intent. Marketers can further corrupt an already compromised science, compounding the felony. Marketers can ignore consumer agency, disingenuously discover an experience economy that has always existed, and then appropriate consumer creativity in service to the brand. Marketers can inexpertly apply a one-size-fits-all commercial template to social concerns for which it is ill-suited, rather than attend to nuance and selectively modify models to engage challenge more effectively. These decisions arise from the latitude marketers are given in matching the goals of consumer and corporate satisfaction.

We learn from the volume's contributors that marketing rhetoric shapes not only positioning decisions but cultural evolution as well. Marketing becomes a cognitive and visceral way of knowing that reinforces and alters social structure (class, ethnicity, gender, life course, core/periphery relations) over time. Stakeholder snafu is often the order of the day, and, as with sausage, spicy succulence may be the end result, but consumers (perhaps especially students) are not encouraged to watch how marketing is actually made.

Reformation

It is interesting to speculate whether or not the current economic meltdown, coupled with the escalating threat of environmental degradation, will have a significant lasting effect on consumer behavior. Will frugality and involuntary simplicity become hazy memories if the economy rebounds and the ice caps remain visible in the next few years? Will a revitalization movement depose the culture of consumption and readjust our relationship to the world of goods? Will the global transformation the Mayan calendar predicts for 2012 be catalyzed by these synchronous economic and ecological calamities? It appears there has never been a more propitious time (aside, perhaps, from Stephen Brown's millenarian Belfast trilogy of conferences) to reconsider the roots and fruits of marketing. A re-conceiving of the marketing imagination (again, pace Levitt) would seem to be a moral imperative for our field. I offer a mythopoeic injunction. Just as the universe is danced into being, so the dance of death will close it out. We will need to separate the dancer from the dance, if

just for awhile, to improve and prolong the quality of life. To the extent that marketing calls the tune, marketing ought to be reformed.

The ambitious agenda of *Inside Marketing*, like that of its predecessor *Philosophical and Radical Thought in Marketing*, and its contemporaries *Critical Marketing: Defining the Field* and *Critical Marketing: Issues in Contemporary Marketing*, challenges us to understand more comprehensively and apply more humanely one of the most powerful forces on the planet. Taming and harnessing this force requires that its theoretical assumptions and practical consequences be inventoried and assessed on a regular basis, so that dysfunctional conventional wisdom is not perpetually recycled. Critical analysis is the first step, and the questions it raises comprise the platform from which practical answers can be sought. A cultural perspective must guide this analysis, if the reformation is to be comprehensive.

It is time for marketing to be rocked by the reflexive revolution that has unmoored the identities of its neighboring disciplines (Sherry, 2008a). And that revolution should be televised. Our authors have revealed a host of flashpoints from which to commence: Pre-commercial marketing. Branditization. Segment caricaturization. Social engineering. Latent theories-in-use. Upstream ethics. Researcher activism. . . . Let us hope that this new wave of reflexivity will sustain and deepen the marketing reformation, and lead to a new era (Applbaum, 2004) of more elegant theorizing and humane practice.

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