3

SLOUCHING TOWARD UTOPIA

When marketing *is* society

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Introduction

While Oscar Wilde has provided our discipline a plethora of aphorisms for reflection – who among us has not potted his pithy observation of cynicism as the knowledge of the price of everything but the value of nothing in our quest to articulate an ethics of marketing? – his meditation on Utopia is the platform for my essay:

> 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 realization of Utopias.
>
> *(Wilde 1891: 303–4)*

Whether we consider it as a field of pure inquiry or as the application of management principles derived from that inquiry to business problems, marketing is the imagination and pursuit of Utopia (Maclaran and Brown 2005). I have posited (Sherry 2011) that marketing may be the foremost Utopian influence abroad in the contemporary world, and, that a moral toll may be exacted if marketers become the principal cartographers of this journey. I build on this position in this chapter, and advocate a role for marketing in cultural reformation.

As an orienting example, I cite a snippet of conversation purportedly overheard at Starbucks, sent to me for enjoyment and redistribution, by a like-minded meme monitor: "Nonfat half-caff-triple-grande quarter-sweet sugar-free vanilla nonfat-lactaid extra-hot extra-foamy caramel macchiato." My reaction to this request for product remains an invocation of the wonderment of comedian Yakov Smirnoff: "What a country!" The phrase, at once a celebration of the

miracle of hyper-customized instant gratification and an indictment of misplaced consumer priority, arouses an ambivalence in me that I struggle to unpack (Sherry 2008), self-consciously immersed as I am in consumer culture.

The choice seems to represent both the zenith and the nadir of our culture, and directs our contemplation from the sublime to the ridiculous. That the apotheosis and trivialization of choice can reside in the same example is an outcome of the anthropological sensibility that governs my marketing imagination. From my perspective (Sherry 2008),

> 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: 3)*

This position stems from my belief that an imperfectly understood shadowland surrounds the aggregate marketing system (Wilkie and Moore 1999) that my colleagues have labored to describe. By shadowland, I mean a world that has arisen in response to our managerial activity, but which has been obscurely rendered by our disciplinary focus and left relatively unexplored by marketers. This shadowland has been called the culture of consumption by our discipline's critics, and cited (Sherry 2008) as a global threat to the common good:

> 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.
>
> *(p. 88)*

Consumption pervades everything we do. It is the idiom in which our most important considerations are discussed. It has become a measure of moral development, in that the level of one's ability to consume often determines self-worth, not merely fiscal worth, rendering some lives perceptually more valuable than others. With marketing as its engine, consumption pits the forces of destructive creation against those of creative destruction (Sherry 2008), to drastic effect:

> 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.
>
> *(p. 89)*

The moral gravity of consumption, whether considered in critique or defense (Livingston 2011; Potter 2010), and its sociocultural consequences, have increasingly exercised researchers (Schor *et al.* 2010) as the exploration of consumer behavior has grown beyond the field of marketing.

In the next sections of this chapter, I detail the evolution of our understanding of the societal impact of marketing. The stages I describe are all currently under active construction, even though I array them along a developmental continuum. I depict them graphically in Figure 3.1. I speculate on the prospects of harnessing the discipline to the task of achieving the common good. Finally, I offer some directives for negotiating the shadowland we have created.

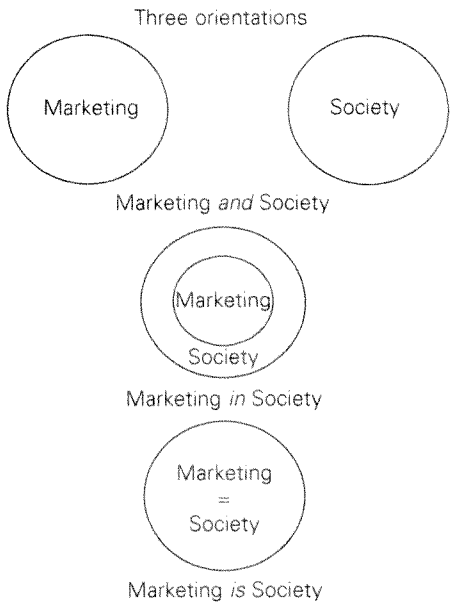

FIGURE 3.1 The three evolutionary stages of our understanding of the societal impact of marketing.

Marketing *and* society

The marketing *and* society orientation, as the conjunction in the label suggests, connotes a simple combination or co-occurrence of areas, such that each domain is at best semi-autonomous and reciprocally influential. These domains are usefully considered together, in light of one another, and doing so produces mutual illumination. This view typically privileges the perspective of the firm, despite the attention given to societal impact.

The marketing *and* society orientation has been succinctly summarized into a set of six principal concerns by Gundlach *et al.* (2007). The macromarketing area is characterized by a focus on the aggregate marketing system and its societal impact. The public policy and marketing area has been largely attuned to domestic regulatory and legislative issues. The international consumer policy area has addressed analogous foreign regulatory and legislative issues. The social marketing area has addressed the topic of social change. The marketing ethics area has treated the challenge of corporate morality. Finally, the consumer interest economics area has been the platform for stand-alone sorties by researchers into a number of siloed fields. While there is some overlap among these six areas, it is reasonable to view their projects as exercises in discrete inquiry, with little effort devoted to integration across focal concerns.

Marketing *in* society

The marketing *in* society orientation, as the preposition in the label suggests, connotes a more complex situating or nesting of areas, such that the former domain is included in the latter, engulfed or incorporated in a way that allows for symbiosis to occur. This arrangement implies that society is the structure (and structuring agent) within which marketing acts. Society governs marketing even as the governance is influenced by its subject. Marketing is contained by society, much as religion, politics, and other institutions that shape and reflect the polity have been throughout time.

The marketing *in* society orientation provides us with the earliest intimations of the shadowland I have just described. Using the same six domains identified by Gundlach *et al.* (2007) that I've just employed, and inserting a seventh diagnostic dimension, let me unpack this orientation at greater length, from the perspective of the shadowland.

The macromarketing area is the most apparent portal to the culture of consumption, revealing the complications and sequelae of the marketing ethos to analysts probing beyond the managerial imperative. If we understand marketing as a realm of fascination for the culture itself, and not simply as an efficient means of need detection and benefit distribution, the extra-economic importance of consumption swiftly becomes apparent. By treating marketing as a cultural cynosure, we understand managers as behavioral architects and moral actors that profoundly shape not only the quality of life, but the continued viability of life itself.

The public policy and marketing area provides a window onto a fundamental principle of regulation, beyond the conventional controls established by governmental authority, which is often labeled appropriation, or co-optation (Holt 2004; Sherry 1995). This principle refers to the tendency of the market to commoditize (and often thence to brand) any sphere of experience with which it comes into contact. This tendency extends equally and vitally to spheres that actively resist or creatively redirect the hegemonic forces of the market. For brevity's sake, let me refer collectively to these spheres as the countercultural. Counterculture is a critical source of anti-structure that fosters cultural stability and change. Counterculture is the wellspring of creativity, and a font of generativity. Marketing routinely engages in countercultural co-optation, appropriating novelty and resistance in the service of spectacle. What now goes by the name of co-creation and prosumption masks this inexorable incorporation of distinctiveness into the evolution of marketing.

The international consumer policy area is a vantage point onto the globalization of this tendency of marketing to assimilate anything in its path, and alter everything in its wake. In particular, Scandinavian researchers have argued for a thorough (and long overdue) exploration of the moral geography of consumption, whose intricate complexity has yet to be satisfactorily charted (Bostrom *et al.* 2005). Further, Nordic researchers have championed a social movement described as political consumerism (Jensen 2005), which advocates the reappropriation of culture through the redirection of the very practices of marketing that produced the original disenchantment. The dream of effecting an emancipatory transformation of consumer culture through an enlightened practice of marketing is certainly one that the academy might embrace.

The social marketing area affords a view of our enterprise that just begins to broach the nature of our complicity in the creation of dissatisfaction on a grand scale. I find it instructive to contemplate an early medical definition of consumption as a wasting disease. Just as medicine has had to grapple with so-called iatrogenic (doctor-caused) disease, so also will marketing need to address mercarigenic (marketer-caused) syndromes, those biocultural disorders whose etiologies lie in the inexorable stimulation and ineffective resolution of desire. For example, analysts now refer to our contemporary culture as "obesogenic," and recognize that what marketing has helped to create, marketing must help to abate.

The marketing ethics area opens up the prospect of developing a philosophy of conscientious consumption, complete with undergirding practices. This enterprise would begin with the recognition that consumption is still incompletely understood, and that, despite the intensity of its critique, it not only embodies and supports numerous prosocial conditions, but also may be the occasion of spiritually uplifting experience as well. To the extent that consumer culture depends upon dissatisfaction for its sustenance, our ability to deflect what Bauman (2008: 173) views as our "nowist" individualistic "discard and replace" focus on disposition toward a systemic appreciation of the consequences of disposition that trains dissatisfaction on the societal impact of our consumer behavior will be paramount. Understanding that consumption is socially embedded, that it consists of

linked streams of decisions, and that it exists at all stages of economic activity will help us avoid overshooting the biophysical and sociopsychological limits of sustainability (Princen *et al.* 2002: 14). Replacing the doctrine of consumer sovereignty with an ethic of sustainable "cautious consuming" – or balanced consumption (Dauvergne 2008) – will require the engagement of many disciplines and stakeholders in a creative act of rethinking (Princen *et al.* 2002: 326). Indeed, the "practices and politics of ethical consumption" should cause us to re-examine "the good life" in ways that "challenge the logics of consumer culture itself" (Lewis and Potter 2011: 18). Penaloza (2012: 512) has proposed a cultural approach to ethics that is relational, dialogic and negotiated, a nesting of micro and macro factors. That ethical consumption is a profoundly political practice akin to a social movement (Barnett *et al.* 2011) should not be overlooked or underestimated by marketers.

The consumer interest economics area is poised to shift from an assemblage of silos to an integrative network of hybrids and creoles. We are currently witnessing an unprecedented interest in the multidisciplinary study of the culture of consumption. This fluorescence can be tracked in the rise of professional societies, conferences and scholarly journals devoted to this inquiry. For purposes of concision, I note just a few of the developments emerging from within my own narrow circles of interest as a reflection of the larger trend afoot. In the past decade, two groups have evolved from the Association for Consumer Research. The first is the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement. The second is the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) Consortium. Through conferences and publications, the former association has focused on consumer welfare and quality of life issues, and the latter on macro, critical, and interpretive approaches to consumption. Because consumption is such a fundamental, rich, and cross-cultural phenomenon, its study virtually begs for collaborative ventures, and its allure has drawn a wide spectrum of consumer researchers into the fold. What started in the early 1980s as a piecemeal migration of solitary scholars into consumer research (itself an emerging field newly differentiated from marketing proper in the mid-1970s) promises to become a comprehensive field-based inquiry as we move into the new millennium's second decade. Just as CCT and TCR researchers have imported the insights of other disciplines into our field, so also are the basic disciplines beginning to discover the work in marketing that would allow them to probe consumption more effectively.

I've added a seventh domain to the marketing *in* society orientation, which I've borrowed from the literary world (Sherry 1991), called K-Mart Realism, to draw attention to the rapidly proliferating trend of artists imbricating marketing into their work. K-Mart realism is a genre of American fiction that is characterized, among other things, by a fascination with consumption venues and brand names. Writers, musicians, painters, performance artists, film makers, and others use marketing as a medium and source of content, as well as interpret, criticize, and celebrate consumption in the bargain. This is a time-honored aesthetic tradition (Outka 2009). Some recent examples include Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl*, William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, Viktor Pelevin's *Homo Zapiens*, Max Barry's *Jennifer Government* and *Company*, Christopher Buckley's *Boomsday*, Jonathan Dees' *Palladio*, Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt*, James Othmer's *The Futurist*, Romuald Hazoume's *Ear Splitting*, Stephen Colbert's *Colbert Report*, and Morgan Spurlock's *Pom Wonderful Presents the Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, to name just a few. This trend is mirrored in the academic realm by the crisis of representation, which finds marketing scholars conveying their understanding of marketplace phenomena in vehicles beyond articles, chapters, and books. Novels, poems, films, and paintings are among the genres currently being exploited, and forays into creative nonfiction grow increasingly common. These trends represent both the increasing interpenetration of marketing and society, and analysts' determination to represent this phenomenon evocatively for their audiences. Whether personnel committees can be persuaded to accept these new genres as evidence of scholarship is a challenge facing senior scholars eager to speed diffusion of marketing thought across disciplinary boundaries (Sherry 2004).

Marketing *is* society

The marketing *is* society orientation has arisen over the past decade in recognition of the subsumption (or, perhaps more precisely, sublation) of culture by marketing, propounded by theorists who claim the two domains have become coterminous. This orientation is associated in particular with the maturation of the CCT tradition (Arnould and Thompson 2005; 2007) of interdisciplinary inquiry into marketplace behavior. The marketing *is* society orientation, as the verb in the label suggests, connotes not just an integration of areas, but their fundamental identity. From this perspective, marketing has so thoroughly pervaded the cultural ethos that the two are indistinguishable from one another. Society and marketing have become coextensive.

This position is a strong-form argument of the type that has previously attached to the critique of mass culture and to the co-optation of counterculture by commerce (Heath and Potter 2004). The position is breathtaking: "Marketing has simply become so diffuse as to be a social activity" (Moore 2007: 86), engaged in by managers, consumers, citizens, consumerists and stakeholders of every conceivable stripe. The position is the culmination of the episodically hotly debated "broadening" of the marketing concept initiated by Kotler and Levy (1969) over four decades ago. The inexorable commodification of formerly (semi-autonomous and (semi-) discrete spheres of cultural production, and the diffusion of marketing philosophy and technique across the domains of everyday practice, not only abet this subsumption of society by marketing, but also mute the expression (or even the possibility) of criticism.

The marketing-is-society perspective derives from a world view of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009) which construes capitalism not just as the only viable political-economic system, but as a way of perceiving that thwarts the mere imagining of viable alternatives. Consumer culture preemptively formats desire and hope, installing a "business ontology" in which "it is simply obvious" that society should

be run as a business, rendering "reflexive impotence" a self-fulfilling prophecy (Fisher 2009: 9; 17; 21). The recent economic meltdown (Tett 2009; McLean and Nocera 2010; Roubini and Mihm 2010) actually suggests that we are not smart enough to "leave things to the market," and that markets need to become less efficient (Chang 2010: 168; 231); in short, many of the economic assumptions undergirding our beliefs are faulty. These current beliefs will not help us avert future financial or environmental disaster (Fisher 2009; Chang 2010). Some finance scholars (Shiller 2012) have begun rethinking their concept of the "good society" to take these matters into account.

As the shadowland engulfs the aggregate marketing system, the components of the former nether region have invited exploration by consumer cultural theorists. These researchers have chronicled the global diffusion and local individuation of the culture of consumption, examining the myriad acts of accommodation and resistance this evolution has encouraged. Let me use the same seven shadowland domains I extrapolated from Gundlach *et al.*'s (2007) analysis to unpack the marketing is society orientation.

The area of countercultural co-optation has given rise to the study of numerous heterotopias, such as the Burning Man Project (Kozinets 2002; Sherry and Kozinets 2007), the Mountain Man Rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998), the Rainbow Gathering (Niman 1997) and the Civil War Reenactment (Mottner and Bryce 2003). Forays into the virtual cyberias and cyburbias of Web 2.0 grow increasingly common, with such alternative metaverses as Second Life (Boellstorf 2010) providing irresistible challenges to researchers interested in the cultural practice of worlding. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) have sought to understand anti-consumption activism as a subversive movement springing in part from religious ideologies that attempts to sacralize collectivist values devoted to realizing the common good over more individualistic goals that enshrine a problematic acquisitiveness. In their introduction to the special issue of *Consumption Markets and Culture* on anti-consumption, Kozinets *et al.* (2010) examine the threat to societal welfare that the individualistic orientation to culture (whether embracing or renouncing of rampant consumption) poses. Further, they consider the prospect of an engaged scholarship that harnesses research to activist ends, implicitly challenging colleagues to descend from the ivory tower to practice espoused values (much as our managerial brethren have done for decades).

The political consumerism area has proved an exceptionally fertile field for inquiry into the common good. Researchers in this area have been especially interested in public goods. Critical theorists and participatory action researchers (Saren *et al.* 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008; Zwick and Cayla 2011) have considered ways of restoring stakeholder equity in marketing transactions. Development studies have also flourished, with inquiries into non-ethnocentric development (Dholakia and Sherry 1987) and sustainable development (Fuller 1999; Dauvergne 2008; Martin and Schouten 2012) broadening and humanizing our conception of the field. Interest in public goods and the reclamation of public space is being renewed (Visconti *et al.* 2010). The emergent field of transformative consumer

research (Mick *et al.* 2012) promises to become a revitalization movement, restoring the common good to a focal position in scholarly consciousness.

The mercarigenic syndromes area has witnessed efforts to redress some of the excesses that have resulted from the neglect and unsophisticated treatment of the wants vs. needs debate within our discipline. The consequences of affluenza (de Graaf *et al.* 2001) are gradually being identified and addressed. The morality of pursuing niche therapies – for example, the treatment of middle-class ailments such as erectile dysfunction or social anxiety to the neglect of more widespread problems associated with lower socioeconomic status, such as tuberculosis, malaria, bilharzia, or various waterborne illnesses – is slowly being questioned (Bodley 2007, 2008; Economist 2012; Inhorn and Brown 1997; McElroy and Townsend 2008). Studies of medical and sexual tourism (Brennan 2004; Hall 2012; Perfetto and Dholakia 2010; Ryan and Hall 2001; Seabrook 2001) are illuminating the dark side of one of commercial colonialism's greatest growth markets. Carbon offset complacency, debt-credit crises and other dysfunctions of an evolving capitalism are currently being explored. Each of these issues speaks directly to the realization of the common good.

The conscientious consumption area has encouraged investigation into a number of alternative forms of capitalism that treat stakeholders more equitably. Schumacher's (1973) early call for a Buddhist economics set the tone for this field, and Payne's (2010) recent updating reinforces the contemporary relevance of Buddhism to the reformation of consumer culture. Voluntary simplicity (Elgin 1981) and bioregionalism (Thayer 2003) are promising and provocative challenges to the status quo. Ecofeminism (Dobscha 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Warren 2000) and ecotheology (Berry 2006; Kearns and Keller 2007; Fox 1988) are also emerging contenders. Hartman (2011) has advanced the case for a consumption ethic grounded in Christian tradition. Inquiry into the lifestyles of the so-called cultural creatives (Florida 2003) is likely to produce additional insight into enlightened consumer behavior, as these individuals are context-sensitive trendsetters.

The area of hybrids and creoles is becoming a hot-house of interdisciplinary possibility, as multidisciplinary inquiries start to converge. Recall that this area is a mélange of fusions and hyphenates, organizations that have managed to blend previously discrete realms of interest into insightful new combinations. Scholarly societies and professional associations are rapidly spawning structures (such as interest groups) devoted to understanding contemporary marketing and consumer behavior. These pods are gradually colliding, even as their denizens travel between them. Again, in the interest of space, I identify just a few of these groups in my own area of interest to illustrate the potential of this awakening in contiguous disciplines. The American Anthropological Association has groups devoted to public policy and government regulation, managerial practice, and economic behavior. Further, the Society for Applied Anthropology and the Society for Economic Anthropology are each concerned with issues of consumption worldwide. The American Sociological Association has recently launched a Consumer Studies Research Network; the European Sociological Association has an analogous

Consumer Research Network. The Association of American Geographers also has an Economic Geography Specialty group. Finally, Charisma (charisma-network.net) is a web-based interdisciplinary consortium of international researchers focused on consumer market studies, both theoretical and applied. As bridges are forged between groups, and as marketing and consumer research literatures diffuse across boundaries, convergence will become the order of the day. This local snapshot of the cross-disciplinary fervor afoot in the academic world mirrors the diversification of interest at work in our own field. The proliferation of newsletters, and of interdisciplinary journals such as *Culture, Markets & Consumption*, the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Cultural Geographies*, *Space and Culture*, and the *Journal of Material Culture*, to name just a few, is also a harbinger of a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of marketplace behavior awaiting development.

The crisis of representation area holds out the hope that our scholarly understanding of marketing and consumption can be deepened, humanized, and communicated beyond our conventional academic boundaries. Researchers are increasingly employing the very media that their artistic brethren have developed both to dimensionalize insight and render it evocatively, to promote a visceral comprehension of marketing and consumption. For example, scholarly poetry has appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Advertising*, the *Journal of Business Research*, and *Consumption Markets & Culture*, as well as in chapbooks (Wijland *et al.* 2010; Wijland 2011). Stephen Brown's (2006, 2008, 2009) trilogy of marketing novels is another engaging example. Ronald Hill's (2001) evocative collection of short stories on homelessness is yet another. As the volume of this artistic activity increases, our theoretical and practical insight into consumption and marketing will deepen.

Reflection

In his study of emancipatory consumption, Kozinets (2002) asks a provocative question: Can consumers escape the market? In response to the commercialization of civic life, which countercultures have arguably abetted, some critics (Heath and Potter 2004: 333) have suggested that we "make the best of global capitalism" by "searching high and low for market failures and, when we find them, thinking creatively about how they can be resolved". Heath and Potter (2004: 8) advocate "measured reform from within the system." Activists collectively described as "culture jammers" have tried to sabotage, appropriate, and even intensify the marketing ethos in their effort to offer resistance; none of these strategies is predicated on attaining independence from the market (Harold 2007). The "pervasive ubiquity of late capital" seems to limit resistance to "[valuable] incremental reform" (Harold 2007: 26, 68). The inability to extricate ourselves completely from consumer culture is mitigated by the rise of open source and open content movements; that intensifies market logics (in effect co-opting them) to create consuming publics capable of generating the common good, largely by shifting our conception of property from the proprietary to propriety (Harold 2007: 145, 157). These groups

are able to focus on issues important to the community rather than to marketers, and engage in empowering cocreation rather than passively outsourcing agentic faculties. Ownership in this context becomes less important than sharing, on many dimensions.

The conflation of consumption and our culturally mandated quest for authenticity (Heath and Potter 2004: 185) is one of the principal drivers of the culture of consumption, and an anchor of the marketing-*is*-society world view. Market mediation is an invaluable component of contemporary authenticity (Outka 2009; Beverland 2009; Gilmore and Pine 2007), for better and for worse. For that quest to evolve beyond a simple status competition (Potter 2010), and for marketers to assist consumers in realizing the common good, some metamarketing might be in order. If marketing's technology of influence (from the mythological to the logistical) were to be redeployed in the service of redirecting our quest for authenticity from a materialist to an ecological plane – to an ecocentric enterprise that reinvested our animistic impulse back into the natural world from its current materialist moorings – the spiritual ends of immanence and transcendence might be subversively realized (Sherry 2000).

If, as Hardt and Negri (2009: 377) assert, happiness is "perhaps the ultimate collective good," requiring an "institutional character to guarantee its longevity," the creation of a durable happiness seems an appropriate Utopian project for marketers to undertake. This would be a deep or serious happiness, a kind of balanced, harmonious contentment, which would remake consumption as a means of re-enchanting the world. This happiness would be contingent upon the recognition of the marketing *is* society position as a calamitous overshooting of the marketing *in* society orientation, and a course correction that realigned marketing with culturally sacrosanct values. The early intimations of Marketing 3.0 – discernible in the practices of collaborative, cultural and human spirit marketing – suggest that managers may be growing more receptive to a transformation in their activity that might better shape the common good (Kotler *et al.* 2010).

Utopia and the common good

I began this chapter by invoking Oscar Wilde. I conclude by evoking William Butler Yeats (1921: 19):

> Surely some revelation is at hand;
>
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
>
> The Second Coming!

That rough beast Yeats imagines slouching toward Bethlehem might well be understood as the reimagined marketing I have long espoused (Sherry 2000). The breathless awe the poet intones might be inspired by the diversion of the marketing imagination from the pursuit of a fracturing, egocentric (and inexorably

totalizing) You-topia to a quest for a unifying Utopia focused squarely on the common good. This transformation implies a shift from a stakeholder-centric (or even a socio-entric) view of marketing to one that is more properly geo- or eco-centric, one that exalts systemic good above mere individual satisfaction (and the hegemony the ego-centric approach has produced). Ironically, perversely – as my friend Kal Applbaum (2004) chides me – and inevitably, the reclamation of culture from marketing is best accomplished with the assistance of marketers (Sherry 2008). The Second Coming of marketing will be a social movement focused on the common good.

In a provocative, if curiously reasoned, defense of consumer culture, Livingston (2011: 42-44) asserts that, since consumption rather than private investment has driven economic growth since 1919, and since household savings are not needed to fund growth through private investment, deferred gratification fosters neither public good nor private character. Consumer culture enables a "politics of more" to flourish, whose pleasures elude us to the extent that we are haunted by the Protestant work ethic, whose "pathos of productivity" interferes with the self-love we express in our embrace of extravagance (Livingston 2011: 77, 165, 179).

In place of the "metapolitical discourse" of the critique of consumer culture, Livingston (2011: 74, 89) proposes that the consumption ethos (whose dysfunctions he cursorily catalogues and dismisses with a minimum of counterargumentation) be used to forge a metapolitical critique of the ethos of economic growth. In short, he advocates the use of consumption as a vehicle for re-examining the kinds of individuals – and, by extension, society – we want to become. For Livingston (2011: 179), the goal is to work less and consume more, with the expectation that consumption can create a more hospitable, equitable and ecologically considerate culture. Regrettably, he offers no blueprint or action plans for the achievement of this alternative Utopia. While a close reading of consumer behavior (of the type espoused by CCT researchers) may, and, I believe, should, be used to inform a reformation of contemporary cultural values, it does not in itself mitigate the blow-back that the culture has generated. It will take a transfiguration of consumer culture to produce the Utopia that Livingston envisions.

Keat (2000) construes consumer sovereignty as a threat to practices – after MacIntyre (1981), social activities with internal standards of excellence that are supraordinate to external goods such as power, status, or money – as the former is based on preferences that may be inimical to the internal standards of the latter. Cultural practices embody (in the form of values), varying conceptions of "the good" that contribute to people's well-being (Keat 2000: 47). In the face of the "colonizing tendencies" of the market, consumer preferences can trump values, rendering cultural institutions ineffective in complementing the market's ability to generate the conditions of its own continued success. Keat (2000: 152, 156-57, 162) places these cultural goods (or metagoods) beyond the market, and regards them as necessary to ensuring that the market contributes to human welfare: cultural goods help us assess the value of consumer goods to our well-being. The CCT tradition has long maintained that the rhetoric of the market has masked more than a few problematic assumptions,

beginning with foundational vocabulary. Consumer "goods" are more accurately understood as "neutrals" susceptible to cultural valence, and are as often better construed as "bads" that work against essential interests of stakeholders.

Keat (2000: 167) calls for a "democratic debate" about the market under the aegis of a "politics of common goods." I have asserted that this debate has begun within our discipline, and that marketers need to be among the vanguard of reformers in re-establishing a conception of the common good. Moral evaluation and critique have long been staples in consumer studies outside the field of marketing (Schor *et al.* 2010). It is time for such values-based assessment to take root in our own field as well.

New York mayor Michael Bloomberg's recent proposal that the city ban the sale of sugary soft drinks in containers larger than 16 ounces has generated great controversy in many quarters (Saul and Grossman 2012), and has spawned a number of full-page ads in the *New York Times* lashing out at the nanny state. The Disney Corporation's recent decisions to alter its advertising in child-centric media to conform to strict nutritional standards, and to reduce sodium levels of foods served in its parks, has also been criticized by some consumerists (Barnes 2012). The difficulty of creating consensual solutions even to widely recognized problems is an indication of the urgent need for immediate and enlightened discussion of the kind of society we wish to inhabit. Deshpande's recent work on customer-centric marketing (e.g., Deshpande and Raina 2011; Deshpande *et al.* 2012), in which he examines some of the specific practices undertaken and resulting challenges encountered by managers seeking to contribute to the common good, might be a useful primer for pragmatists and idealists to consult as a prelude to such discussion.

The question of whether or not it is possible to reconcile markets and morals (Friedman 2008) is at the heart of our quest for the common good, especially in this era of looming sociocultural, geopolitical, and ecological degradation. Satz's (2010) analysis of noxious markets is one potent example of the urgent need to address this question in a public forum. Sandel's (2012) call for a civic discussion of the moral limits of markets – and a rethinking of the moral assumptions that have guided economic reasoning about the polity – is a timely prompt for a rethinking of our conceptions of the good life. This discussion should involve all stakeholders, and focus on the common good. This civic conversation can become the platform for the launch of Capitalism 4.0 (Kaletsky 2010). Coyle's (2011) recent manifesto for a rethinking of capitalism, and the consequences of reconsidering happiness, nature, posterity, fairness, and trust, is a provocative first step in this direction. Challenges facing consumers committed to overhauling contemporary culture, such as the insatiability of want (Gagnier 2000), extreme conservation (Hengeveld 2012), sharing (Belk 2010), and collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers 2010), to name just a few, remain to be enumerated and operationalized.

The emergence of a rationale mobilizing an ethical, sustainable consumption, described as "alternative hedonism" – the tendency of affluence to give rise to revised conceptions of individual and common good – is a hopeful contemporary utopian impulse, to the extent that the "pleasures of affluence" are recognized as

"both *compromised* by their negative by-products, and as *pre-emptive* of other enjoyments" (Soper 2007: 210-212). The civic rethinking of consumption and its relation to the common good is a vision quest in which our field must fully participate if the "good life" is to be justly distributed.

Millenarian marketers will help us temper materialism with a sensitivity to materiality, an appreciation of the animate vibrancy of matter (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2000), that will allow us to re-enchant the natural world and avoid ecological collapse (Sherry 2000). As guerrilla semioticians, they will help us deconstruct, desacralize, and decommission fetishes, allowing us to concentrate on communal quality of life. They will practice demarketing, hell yes, demarketing (Kotler and Levy 1971), and not merely clean up the problems they create, but successfully ferret out unanticipated and unintended consequences of their prospective decisions. They will homestead the frontiers of disciplinary research. They will seek generativity in new genres, using our encounters with art as teaching moments to help us contemplate, discern and feel the goodness of fit of wants with needs. They will encourage us to understand the directions in which our consumer behaviors ramify, just as they have meditated on the ramifications of their own teaching, research, and consulting to produce an engaged scholarship. They will forge an alliance between managers, policymakers, consumers, and citizens in an effort to negotiate and implement the common good. They will help us steer between the Scylla of the free market and the Charybdis of state capitalism as we navigate the next Utopia.

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