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Marketing Theory 2008; 8; 465
DOI: 10.1177/1470593108096546

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Final thoughts on amnesia and marketing theory

Mark Tadajewski
University of Leicester, UK

Abstract. In this paper I selectively reflect on the contents of the special issue, focusing on the structuring of the academy and the society in which we operate. I examine the epistemological structuring of marketing in relation to what counts as a contribution to knowledge, the effects of the way we use particular theory to sensitize ourselves to the wider world, and how this theory in turn restricts how we think about marketing theory and consumer practice, especially in less ‘developed’ countries. Key Words • amnesia • critical marketing studies • ethnocentrism • paradigm debate • under-class

Introduction

As the history and philosophy of science reminds us (Bhaskar, 1975; Feyerabend, 1975; Kuhn, 1970; Ravetz, 1973), the way we think about marketing is political in the sense that our own biased axiological system determines those issues that gain attention (Benton, 1985; Deetz, 2000; Firat, 1987). In line with this way of thinking about the academy as a political arena, as scholars we each have certain ways of approaching our subject matter that can bias us against alternative ways of viewing marketing and consumer practice. Without doubt, we all know, whether through formal training or informal discussion with peers and mentors, that there are certain methodological approaches that are liable to leave the researcher open to serious, possibly unwarranted, criticism (Brown, 1998).

Theodore Levitt, with typical acuity, was quick to realize this: ‘Our chauvinistic faith in the superior virtues of reason and in man’s capacity for reasonableness need not be fetishized into blind disregard of our less noble capabilities’ (Levitt, 1969: 238). And Gould’s (2008b, this issue) account of his intellectual genealogy certainly signals that the boundaries of marketing theory are not quite as plural as we may like. So, where Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) call for ‘PEACE’ between paradigmatic communities, we still appear to have some way to go before their
vision of intellectual multiculturalism is put into practice. Holbrook himself is quick to advocate the use of a variety of radical interpretive perspectives, while at the same time warning others to avoid similar career paths (e.g. Holbrook, 1995: 23). Regardless of his comments about ‘peace’, etc., Holbrook is well aware that in epistemological terms, there is little evidence of pluralism when it comes to determining the contribution to knowledge that a given perspective makes, as Wittink identifies quite correctly:

A difficult element in the evaluation of research is for the editor and reviewers to be open minded. Our lives would be subject to enormous difficulty and ambiguity if we did not use rules, simplifications, and various mechanisms to make sense of a complex environment. For that reason alone, it is understandable that we exhibit certain biases in judgments that sometimes reduce the quality of our decisions. Still, there are good reasons to follow specified processes and to use established paradigms. However, especially when many researchers have contributed to the literature on a topic, invisible barriers to revisionism loom large. (Wittink, 2004: 3)

What is interesting about the Gould-JCR episode is how it continues to be replicated in exchanges in our journals today. Indeed, if we consider the history of interpretive consumer research then we appear, as a matter of fact, to be going backwards in the paradigm debate. As Shankar and Patterson (2001) illustrated, at one point in the mid-1990s interpretive researchers essentially had to conform to quasi-positivistic standards of evaluation. This, they suggest, later changed when more appropriate standards of justification and evaluation were developed and sympathetic scholars were found to examine interpretive manuscripts. But there are only so many interpretive scholars available to evaluate these papers, and other commentators in the paradigm debate are less reluctant to examine such works of scholarship on their own merit, preferring instead to impose frameworks for evaluation upon them that are alien to the axiological tenets of interpretive consumer research.

The return of quasi-positivism

In a topical paper, Woodside (2004) provides an overview of the role of introspection in consumer research. Interestingly, he bypasses the history of motivation research, with all its connotations of ‘hidden persuaders’ and so on, that might be construed as placing his account on the kind of subjective ground that he prefers to distance himself from (Bargh, 2002; Dholakia, 1988). This is in spite of the genealogical linkages between his work and that of Ernest Dichter1 (see Tadajewski, 2006b).

Like Gould (2008a, 2008b) Woodside can appreciate that we all engage in introspection in our research pursuits (e.g. Venkatesh, 1995). Even so, there are, Woodside professes, more rigorous ways of engaging in introspection than those practised by Holbrook or Gould. For Woodside, the use of multiple-methods and ‘inside’2 and ‘cohort’ auditors who can be called upon to validate the reflections of the principal researcher are just such rigorous methods. A further reason why
additional validation checks are valuable is, clearly, that they make introspective-esque research look more generalizable than they might otherwise be considered by the marketing manager and their boardroom superiors (Gould, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). After all, marketers are interested in reaching ‘large consumer segments’ and with this objective in mind, subjective personal introspection will appear ‘idiosyncratic, and ungeneralizable, and quite non-commodifiable’ (Gould, 2008a: 319; cf. Giddens, 2003: 397; Gould, 2005: 256).

Still, Woodside’s concern for intersubjective verification is understandable. It is consistent with the research emphasis of many scholars in marketing who demand that scientific research conform to a set of restricted characteristics (Tadajewski, 2006a, 2008), regardless of whether the research concerned should adhere to the positivistic evaluation criteria that Woodside adopts. What I mean by this is that Woodside replicates a move by earlier interpretive researchers to adapt Lincoln and Guba’s criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (e.g. Woodside, 2004: 995) which they used to justify their research according to positivistic standards, in order to publish in the Journal of Consumer Research (Holt, 1991).

By manipulating research to obey such standards, we ‘merge . . . interpretive consumer research with positivist criteria’ (Holt, 1991: 58; cf. Gould, 2005: 256). Holt’s criticism of this way of justifying interpretive research is scathing. He writes: ‘In adopting an objectivist evaluative banner, interpretive consumer research risks displacing insightful interpretation with methodological dogma that will constrain research without yielding a balancing increase in verity’ (Holt, 1991: 61). Taking this point further, he questions the ability of the type of criteria advocated by Woodside (2004) to guarantee ‘greater trustworthiness’: ‘The use of specific techniques, such as those proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989), does not necessarily lead to more trustworthy research and thus they should not be used for evaluation’, Holt opines.

Objectivity or solidarity?

Rather than trying to enforce evaluative straitjackets where they are not appropriate, perhaps we should just admit that we possess distinct biases and intellectual predilections. The paradigms we use provide us with a way of viewing the world and at the same time will structure the worldview we possess (O’Shaughnessy, 2008). Certain ways of looking at marketing or consumption phenomena will be more convincing to some reviewers and scholars, and less so to others (Tadajewski, 2008).

We are not objective, and putting our biases aside as if we can engage in the kind of phenomenological reduction that Husserl discussed might not necessarily be the most valuable way of approaching our intellectual activities anyway, as Kuhn (1977) realized. Why not simply assert the solidaristic function that our own paradigms provide us with, as Rorty (1991) proposed? Should we privilege our own paradigm, even though doing so cannot be justified in a non-circular way (cf.
Holt, 1991)? In fact, we already do this, and Barton Weitz is notably keyed into this idea – although he does not talk about it in the terms I use. He argues that intellectual pluralism is valuable to the discipline. In discussing his role as the editor of the *Journal of Marketing Research* he stated that he wanted to ‘publish the entire spectrum of research in marketing, from analytical models of marketing phenomena to descriptive studies that use ethnographic methodologies’ (Weitz, 1992: 1). All the same, Weitz indicated that his ‘philosophical orientation will guide . . . decisions when I evaluate manuscripts in light of reviewer comments. In addition, I will make a special effort to motivate research consistent with my perspective and to assist it through the review process’ (Weitz, 1992: 3; cf. Svensson, 2006: 1158).

The help ‘through the review process’ that Weitz wants to provide to research that mirrors his own seems fair enough. He is privileging his own intellectual community and for Rorty this represents a form of ethnocentricism, rather than relativism: ‘To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s beliefs and the others. The first group – one’s *ethnos* – comprises those who share enough of one’s beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study’ (Rorty, 1991: 30).

However, since some groups will have access to the means of intellectual production more readily, this will impact on the way we understand the nature of marketing itself (Brown, 1998; Brownlie, 2006). As a consequence, encouraging each and all to ignore or otherwise dismiss the contributions of those from alternative paradigmatic perspectives would surely be intellectually myopic. We can experience the kind of ‘weak incommensurability’ that Anderson (1986) discussed. And this may prevent us assuming some consensus position on a given topic of inquiry, without precluding the cross-fertilization of ideas (Davies and Fitchett, 2005). Just as we should not dismiss the scholarly contributions of those with whom we do not necessarily agree, neither should we forget the intellectual input of our precursors, as a variety of scholars have repeatedly argued (e.g. Hollander, 1986; Tadajewski and Jones, 2008).

**Ignoring the Titan in the room**

And yet, according to some, we continue to make this mistake, thereby failing to stand on the shoulders of the scholarly giants that lived before us, making crucial advances that enable us to see just so far, and then a bit further (Bedeian, 2004). As was noted by Connerton (2008), sometimes we forget our intellectual predecessors because it serves some useful purpose, in that we can thereby position our contribution to knowledge as somehow more ground breaking than it in fact was.

When we are beyond the realm of the earthly here and now, it is even more difficult to suggest that our contribution has been forgotten or not given its due. A dead person, then, regardless of whether or not they are a titan of marketing thought (Brown, 2002), can find it somewhat tricky to respond to scholarship that
arguably mirrors their own. In this case, marketing historians should be thanked for taking up the opportunity to re-examine the ‘radical reformulations’ (Aitken et al., 2006) that are marketed to the academy as a shift in the way we view the nature of exchange itself; and, in turn, marketing.

It is fair to say that Wooliscroft’s (2008) paper is timely. But he is not the first to express the view that Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) contribution to the *Journal of Marketing* might have closer connections to Alderson’s work than the authors acknowledge, despite one of them (Lusch) being very knowledgeable about Alderson’s corpus. Brown (2007) has made a similar gesture, and also pointed out that

The late great Levitt, in fact, actually foreshadowed SDL in his classic 1972 article, ‘Production-Line Approach to Service’, the opening paragraph of which clearly states that ‘There are no such things as service industries. There are only industries whose service components are greater or less those of other industries. Everyone is in service’. However, in all the compendious commentary on SDL, I have yet to find a formal acknowledgement of Father Ted’s brilliant anticipation of V&L’s retrotastic achievement. Many debaters and debunkers, it seems, are much too busy parading their own prescience to identify the most insightful forerunners. (Brown, 2007: 293)

Although Vargo and Lusch did not actually mention Levitt in their 2004 publication, they have subsequently devoted greater attention to the historical antecedents of their work especially that found in frequently cited, but rarely read economics texts (Evensky, 1993). Vargo and Morgan (2005), for example, have published some of this work, and Vargo and Lusch (2008) detail more of the early economic thought that provided them with many of the ideas they synthesized in their well received paper(s). And in their 2008 reflection on their own work, they have affirmed the value of Alderson’s re-conceptualization of the concept of utility and the influence of this in their intellectual development (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

Much as Vargo and Lusch (2008) admit, the history of our discipline, as well as that of sister subjects like economics, occasionally again influences our theoretical orientation, long after particular ways of looking at marketing were cemented in a specific fashion (i.e. a goods-dominant logic). Some of the marketing literature may deserve to be forgotten, as Patterson et al. (2008), tongue firmly-in-cheek, proposed. Other scholars, by contrast, agree with Wooliscroft (2008) that we would do very well to remember our history both because it is scholarly to cite the appropriate intellectual foundations for one’s work, but also so that we can avoid reinventing various ‘theoretical, conceptual and methodological wheels’ as we move through our academic lifecycles (Tadajewski and Jones, 2008); an issue that was central to Henry and Caldwell’s (2008) explication of W.L. Warner’s research.

**Back to the future**

Where now it may be common to hear remarks that announce the relative freedom of the individual from class and other structural influences – such as those
uttered by politicians like the UK Conservative leader, David Cameron (The Spectator, 2008) and by the influential sociologist, Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 2003) – others are reluctant to support this voluntarism uncritically. Far removed from Lyotard’s gesture to the postmodern individual who switches clothes and tastes as the moment requires, Henry and Caldwell (2008) ask us to reflect on the importance of social class in structuring consumer behaviour. They remind us of a time when debates relating to structure versus agency, came down in favour of the former.

Even in the face of the postmodern turn, the influence of social class as a structuring influence in our everyday lives, is again increasingly viewed as an important mechanism for socializing the individual, affecting their decision-making processes and life-choices, not in altogether positive ways (Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Allen, 2002; Ozanne et al., 2005; Wallendorf, 2001; cf. Varman and Belk, 2008; Venkatesh, 1995; Wilk, 2001). This return to social class and the application of the work of ‘genetic structuralists’ that accompany it, is to be welcomed (Honneth et al., 1986; cf. Trentmann, 2006). Whilst Henry and Caldwell’s study is valuable in terms of reminding us of the contributions of Warner, the critique of Holt that is implied in their conclusion appears to be unwittingly inconsistent with Holt’s position.

Social class, Warner and Holt: Reinventing Warner or something else?

In their paper Henry and Caldwell highlight the neglected contributions of Warner and his co-authors. Class, obviously, has been an important indicator of social position for many years (see Bendix and Lipset, 1953). We can move rapidly through the history of these debates. Veblen’s (1899/1934) account of conspicuous consumption must figure prominently, as should Lynd’s (1932, 1934, 1936) explanation of the role of the most powerful in the structuring of consumption choices (see also Appel, 1911). The wealthy, noticeably, had greater amounts of money to spend and manufacturers and retailers responded to their requirements (cf. Alwitt, 1995; Burton et al., 2005).

From this we can then turn to Rorty’s (1934/1976) critique of advertising and big business in the 1930s, which he said arguably played a major role in diffusing consumerist values, at the same time as mollifying the masses and reducing social disharmony (cf. Varman and Belk, 2008). In much the same way, our attention should surely turn to the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industries and the way that ‘mass culture’ was not created by the masses, but by those at the apex of capitalist society (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), along with Mills’ discussion of the power elite (Mills, 1956), through to Galbraith’s (1958, 1967) condemnation of the causal nexus between production and consumption and so on and so forth. What this brief survey of the various critiques of marketing, advertising and the consumer society indicate, is that some kind of class relationship has always
been important in understanding the antagonism bubbling under the polite veneer of American society.

But as Henry and Caldwell demonstrate, for some reason the use of social class as a sociological category has been relatively unpopular with marketing scholars, and Henry and Caldwell attempt to outline those factors that appeared important in encouraging scholars to fail to engage with such concepts. In this regard they list: the ‘myth of social equality’, ‘limited agreement on classification systems’, ‘conceptual confusion via reductionism’ and the greater use of quantitative data gathering and analysis techniques (see Tadajewski, 2006a, 2006b).

Connecting their analysis to changes in American society, we could go further and factor in the Cold War and the ensuing movement away from radical approaches in sociology (Agger, 2007; Fournier and Grey, 2000). Fantasia (1995) argued that research – however vaguely associated with neo-Marxism – was viewed with suspicion, and class research of most kinds fell into this category. This ‘suspicion’ effectively halted research on ‘class consciousness’ for thirty years after the second World War. Concomitantly, the general lack of impact of critical theory inside sociology in the intervening years and the tenure problems faced by those inclined to these approaches further led some students to avoid these paradigms and topics (e.g. Agger, 2007: 242; cf. Giroux, 1993–94: 17; Slater and Miller, 2007: 7).

Mobilizing agency

Regardless of the complexity of the history of social class, it does offer some utility as a sensitizing device when reformulated for the present social conditions (Holt, 1998). For one, it functions as a response to the over voluntaristic conceptualization of the postmodern consumer (Hirschman, 2008; Miller, 2001; Scott, 1993; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). The representation of said individual as an identity changing chameleon appears to me to be decidedly ethnocentric. And the work of Varman and Vikas (2007a, 2007b) should be enough to disabuse us of the idea that beyond Victoria Beckham or Paris Hilton, such postmodern individuals are a comparative rarity (Miller, 2001; Varman and Belk, 2008).

Indeed, Schor has argued that the individualistic focus of much consumer research – rather than the collective focus of social class research (cf. Venkatesh, 1995) – is linked to the rise of neoliberalism (Holt, 2005; Schor, 2007). In her words, the postmodern conception of consumer practice presents ‘consumer motivation as emanating from individual identity projects rather than group conformity. In many ways, this moved the literature closer to an understanding of consumption which is very close to neoclassical or neoliberal economics’ (Schor in Holt, 2005: 16). Related to this, she posits, is the naturalization of the twin ‘ideologies of consumers’ independence and intelligence’ (Schor, 2007: 26). Stressing the congruity between this vision of consumer behaviour with the neoliberal economic leanings of Thatcher in the UK and Regan in the US she says:
What are the neoliberals saying? That people have a set of preferences and they satisfy those preferences and get wellbeing from what they consume. I mean, on some level, can you even debate that statement? It’s almost a truism. But – and the word postmodern is not exactly right . . . the one that I’m talking about is the postmodern consumer who is creating identity, who has a certain type of preferences and who is into frequent changes in consumer preferences. (Schor, in Holt, 2005: 17)

While Schor is being speculative and Holt is not exactly convinced by her argument, unsurprisingly, his work is an important foil for Henry and Caldwell given that he has been at the forefront of studies concerned with the relationship between micro-consumer behaviour and macro-structural influences4 (cf. Lears, 1985).

As Henry and Caldwell appreciate, Holt is interested in refining Bourdieu’s ‘theory of tastes’ (Holt, 1997a: 93). But what we should immediately note is that he does not do so by forgetting the work of his predecessors. Notably Holt sets the terrain for Henry and Caldwell, even though this is not actually acknowledged in their paper, when he writes that ‘neither Bourdieu nor his American critics situate BTT [Bourdieu’s Theory of Tastes] with respect to its most influential precursor: the community studies of social class conducted by the American anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner and his colleagues’ (Holt, 1997a: 94). Just so we know that Holt is not moving too quickly away from Warner, he states that there is much to learn from this work: ‘the Warnerian approach offers methodological innovations and incipient theoretical insights that are foundational for understanding the advances made by BTT’ (Holt, 1997a: 94). This said, Henry and Caldwell appear to imply that Holt has made a similar argument using the work of Bourdieu that could have been gleaned from Warner5. Accepting this, let us contrast a key statement from the work of Warner et al. that Henry and Caldwell use to frame their paper, and then examine Holt’s arguments to see how they differ, if at all.

### Comparing Holt and Henry and Caldwell

Citing Warner et al., Henry and Caldwell (2008) present us with an overview of Warner’s ideas:

Social class enters into almost every aspect of our lives, into marriage, family, business, government, work, and play. It is an important determinant of personality development and is a factor in the kinds of skills, abilities, and intelligence an individual uses to solve his problems . . . what a woman buys to furnish her house and clothe her family is highly controlled by her social class values . . . the house they live in, the neighbourhood they choose to live in, and the friends they invite to their home, consciously or more often unconsciously, demonstrate that class values determine what things we select and what people we choose as our associates.

I am not sure that Holt would agree with either the deterministic language used here, as on my reading of his research, he details a greater degree of individual agency than the quote from Warner acknowledges. In other words, Holt refuses the local determinism that Warner subscribes to, when Warner emphasizes the influence of the local population of a particular village, town or city on the consumption choices made by an individual (e.g. Holt, 1997b: 339, 1998: 3, 12). In
line with this, Holt disputes the implicit ‘object signification’ approach found in Warner’s work, in which ‘consumption objects’ act as ‘positional markers re-
inforcing status boundaries’ (Holt, 1998: 3). Consequently, Holt talks about his interest in extending Warner’s work in light of the changing nature of capitalism, that is, in terms of the emergence of ‘transnational consumer capitalism’ (Holt, 1998: 3). As part of his critique of object signification research, Holt asserts that with increased global travel

The utility of goods as consensus class markers has weakened substantially owing to a variety of widely noted historical shifts. Technological advances have led to the wide accessibility of goods, travel, and media by all but the poor . . . Innovative styles and designs now diffuse rapidly between haute and mass markets, and between core and periphery states, thus dissolving lags that once allowed for stylistic leadership. From a different vantage point, theorists of post-modernity such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson have argued that a defining characteristic of advanced capitalistic societies is the massive overproduction of commodity signs. This proliferation of signs leads to an anarchic welter of consumer symbols that are not assimilated by social groups in any coherent way . . . [So that] In postmodern cultures, it is increasingly difficult to infer status directly from consumption objects, as the object signification approach requires. (Holt, 1998: 5)

Holt (1997a, 1997b) is concerned with moving away from postmodern analyses that refuse to admit that conceptual categories – in this case, in terms of social and cultural capital – have any useful function in our postmodern society. And he sums up his argument as follows: ‘In contrast to both postmodern theorists and marketing researchers who argue that this decline [in the usefulness of social class, etc. as a sociological category] indicates that social categories no longer signifi-
cantly structure consumption, I pursue an alternative position. Structured by the historical changes in the symbolic-expressive characteristics of consumption, the social patterning of consumption has become increasingly subtle and complexly intertwined’ (Holt, 1997b: 343).

In doing so, he distances his work from the orthogonal reductionism character-
istic of nomothetically inflected consumer research (i.e. the use of VALS categories to identify particular lifestyles that elide all of the relevant contextual details that Holt describes via his poststructural analysis). By contrast, the lifestyles he discusses involve consumption practices ‘where consumption objects are used as resources to interact with others, tastes structure not only one’s own consumption practices, but also whom one is attracted to and admires, whom one finds uninteresting or does not understand, and whom one finds unappealing, and so seeks to avoid. Thus, when people enact their tastes through particular consumption practices, they are enacting symbolic boundaries that affect distinctions between collectivi-
ties’ (Holt, 1997b: 343); a quote that is in fact quite similar to that Henry and Caldwell provided in their paper from Warner, which I cited above. All in all, Holt’s research still works against the kind of ‘positivistic reductionism’ that Henry and Caldwell rightly argued stultified the wider use of categories such as social class.
From positivistic reductionism to ethnocentric bias

But the positivistic reductionism discussed above is so easily translated into ethnocentric myopia (Dholakia et al., 1983; Varman and Costa, 2008; Venkatesh, 1995). Many marketing theories and concepts, Dholakia et al. declare, were developed in an American context and should not be uncritically exported throughout the world. Instead, proper attention needs to be paid to the context in which marketing theories are deployed (Venkatesh, 1995). Where Holt (1997b, 1998) and Henry and Caldwell (2008) focused on cultural and social class issues, devoting their attention to consumers in an affluent country, there have been a number of studies that focus their concentration on less affluent populations who are negatively affected by neoliberalism, which Böhm and Brei (2008), Schor (in Holt 2005) and Lauderdale (2008) have discussed in their accounts of the contentious nature of ‘development’ discourses (see also Wilk, 2001). As the aforementioned scholars have pointed out, throughout the world there are various powerful groups that strive to limit the definition of development, so that attempts ‘to control and dominate nature’ are considered a progressive force in terms of social and economic change (Lauderdale, 2008: 1837), and where those least powerful like the ‘untouchables’ in India suffer the consequences (Varman and Belk, 2008; Varman and Vikas, 2007a, 2007b).

What analyses like those by Varman and Vikas (2007a, 2007b) demonstrate, are the massive disparities in income that continue to exist within and between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations that are easily forgotten in the busy-ness of day-to-day life (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2002; Hill and Stamey, 1990; Migone, 2007). To put this point into some context, consider the recent analysis by Migone (2007: 178) that uses a variety of social and economic indicators to note that there are benefits of rising levels of consumption for many, but not for all (see Chakravarti, 2006: 363; Wilk, 2001: 252):

Levels of consumption of both primary and consumer goods and services [have] increased quite dramatically . . . showing little sign of slowing down, but the same consumption has a strongly unequal nature, with the rich consuming enormously more than the poor do. Income is highly concentrated in the so-called developing world. The richest 5 percent of the world’s population has 114 times the income of the poorest 5 percent, with the richest 1 percent receiving the same income as the poorest 57 percent. In the United States, the top 25 million earners have an income comparable to what 2 billion of the world’s poorest receive.

Migone (2007) finds these statistics objectionable, and demands greater equality in the structuring of consumption opportunities throughout the globe. This type of work manages to draw our attention to the fact that there are still some very obvious structures that frame our daily lives, even though these are becoming cognitively and spatially distant from our micro-consumption context (Böhm and Brei, 2008; cf. Varman and Belk, 2008; Varman and Vikas, 2007a). They are supranational structures:

Legal changes are the order of the day in advanced capitalist societies as much as in former socialist ones and in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Each society is reshaping
its legal norms and institutions under the regime of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. New actors – corporate law firms, arbitration bodies, lex mercatoria, international institutions and nongovernmental organizations . . . are contributing to the diversity of forms of regulation, to the variety of settings for rule creation, and to the proliferation of methods of interpretation and application of norms and standards . . . Property rights, patent law, environmental law and human rights are the key areas in which the boundaries between national and transnational contexts are blurred or altogether lost. (Beck, 2008: 797–8)

Where does postmodernism speak to the above issues? Here, then, I follow Morgan (2003) in recognizing the value of postmodernism in questioning the dominance of marketing by logical empiricism, as well as acknowledging the limitations that these postmodern scholars do place on their own work. They do not assert that all consumers can escape the market (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Sherry, 2008; cf. Arnould, 2007) or that the market works in completely desirable ways for all participants (Goulding, 2003).

Evidently, Holt (1998) identifies those with high cultural capital that do, in certain respects, exhibit the characteristics associated with the postmodern consumer discussed by Venkatesh who demonstrates an ‘ability to be a consumer even outside one’s traditional boundaries’ (Venkatesh, 1994: 22–23). Venkatesh goes on to say that we should not assume that all consumers can ‘control their destiny by accessing the world of consumerism and [by] becoming a product of global consumer culture’. Certainly, even those who can consume in this way, choose not to (cf. Clarke et al., 2007), and those living in abject poverty may for a variety of reasons refuse to consider other ways of life (Chakravarti, 2006). This said, the shift in some postmodern work from registering the complexity of everyday life to occasionally sweeping statements, is an aspect of this theoretical stream that is most readily discerned (cf. Sassatelli, 2006; Venkatesh, 1995; Wilk, 2001).

Turning to Venkatesh (1994) again, he moves from an otherwise cautious analysis, to the statement that ‘. . . the postmodern consumer does not have to acquire the products, nor need to have the means to acquire them. All that is needed is the image, that is, the image of accessibility to the products, created through the global institution of advertising. Consumer culture is indeed the culture of consumer images’ (Venkatesh, 1994: 23; cf. Varman and Belk, 2008: 241). In relation to the structures of consumption and the impact of politico-economic decision-making at the highest levels that impacts on the lived-experience of consumers in the world (Firat and Dholakia, 1977; Klein, 2000; Lauderdale, 2008; Schneiderman, 1998), the ‘image of accessibility’ is not only what people want, they want the products and resources required to live healthy lives (e.g. Varman and Vikas, 2007a, 2007b, Vikas and Varman, 2007). And irrespective of what relationship marketing theorists may tell us, they do not want marketers in the developed world to necessarily form close ‘win-win’ relationships with local doctors that then skews access to health care provision for the most needy (Varman and Vikas, 2007a).

To take an example of recent ‘critical marketing’ scholarship that illustrates the impact of structural adjustment programmes, the marketization of state provided resources such as health care and the general lack of win-win outcomes for the less
powerful, regardless of what the relationship marketing literature might otherwise claim (cf. Fischer and Bristor, 1994; Kilbourne, 2004; Lacznia and Murphy, 2008; Schipper, 2002; Varman and Costa, 2008), the comments by Varman and Vikas (2007a) are instructive.

Reflecting on their research conducted in India, these authors write: ‘the decline in government health care facility has been accompanied by greater emphasis on privatization. This structural shift has also [been] strengthened by profit norms and provided legitimacy to market forces. The structural shift is also accompanied by physicians and [a] pharmaceutical firm nexus [designed] to maximize their profits’ (Varman and Vikas, 2007a: 168). These close inter-organizational relations do not provide benefits for all, and Varman and Vikas discuss the distribution of gold jewellery, DVD players and other consumer goods to physicians willing to prescribe particular drugs, in quantities that may not be suitable for their patients. Summarizing their findings, Varman and Vikas continue:

the rise of market forces and [the] marginalization of subaltern consumers in Kanpur [North India] are interrelated processes. This marginalization has created a need gap for consumers, which is being actively plugged by untrained service providers. The subaltern participants . . . display a high level of consciousness about the detrimental role of physicians, private hospitals, and pharmaceutical firms. However, these consumers expressed [their] inability to change the reality because of the increase in their powerlessness in a system increasingly governed by market forces. (Varman and Vikas, 2007a: 168)

(See also Varman and Vikas, 2007b: 123; cf. Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Chakravarti, 2006; Fenelon and Hall, 2008; Varman and Belk, 2008: 243; Wallendorf, 2001).

Thus, the world has not necessarily become more ‘postmodern’ for the benefit of all. There are clear structures of consumption that powerful bodies in the market can and do control (see Witkowski, 2008). But things are improving, however slowly (see Lyon, 2007; McDonagh, 2002; Sherry, 2008; Varman and Kappiarath, 2008; cf. Varman and Belk, 2008) and we should not believe – following Foucault – that any structural influences will function solely as constraints preventing people from changing the present market and marketing system. Let us not forget that.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to survey some of the contents of the special issue, connecting the range of material that interrogated the history and contemporary status of marketing thought. Threaded throughout were examples of amnesia, politics and contestation about the use of marketing theory and how it functions quite effectively as a blinker, but at the same time mobilizes our research endeavours. For this reason we should not be quick to discount the contribution of any way of approaching our subject, nor necessarily be overenthusiastic in joining the latest paradigmatic bandwagon without clearly, thoroughly and reflexively, thinking through the consequences of our actions, for the way we view the role of marketing in society.
As Wilkie and Moore (2006) have shown us, as marketing has been redefined, our attention to the interactions between marketing and society gradually declined (see Shapiro, 2006). As such, those issues that did not and do not pertain to the proximate concerns of the firm were largely forgotten; engagement with public policy, neglected; and research for non-managerial stakeholders given a back-seat (cf. Dobscha and Ozanne, 2008).

But as I said above, things are changing. Following the vociferous debate in the pages of the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, and no doubt informally amongst influential gatekeepers, we are now offered an alternative way of looking at marketing. Society has reappeared again in the definition. For those that missed it, society is tacked on to the end. So, we have changed the definition for the better. But as Dixon (2008) realized in relation to societal marketing, when this way of scrutinizing marketing activities was added to the major textbooks, it got very little coverage and presumably even less pedagogic attention.

Marketing scholarship has always been about more than the production of knowledge for the sake of resolving managerial problems. Obviously, Bartels (1988) devotes considerable attention to this issue, and Kotler and Levy (1969) can be called upon for a gesture to marketing’s role in selling toothpaste and so on. But our historical predecessors also had a distinct concern for ‘social activism’ (Jones, 1994). Thus, from early marketing pioneers like Edward David Jones and Henry Charles Taylor at the University of Wisconsin (Jones, 1994), to those influenced by the German Historicist School (Jones and Monieson, 1990), as well as those who were actively involved in research conducted for public policy purposes in the 1970s (see Burger and Venkatesh, 1979; Kassarjian, 1994/2008), to macro-marketers (Shapiro, 2006) and recent critical marketing scholars (Varman and Belk, 2008; Varman and Vikas, 2007a, 2007b), marketing academics and practitioners have always tried to avoid the foreclosure of alternative ways of looking at the marketing system (Kompridis, 2005). We should be pleased to be following in this reflexive tradition and not forget it.

Notes

My thanks to Martin Parker for writing about amnesia and indirectly encouraging this special issue.

1 Although I should note that Dichter is cited in Woodside (2004: 996, 2006: 269).
2 According to Woodside (2004: 996) the inside auditor is ‘another person involved directly in the focus of the introspection’. In the case of Gould’s (1991) paper, he does thank his wife for her involvement. I think it might have been a bit beyond the pale given what we know of the politics surrounding the publication of this initial work, to have heard more about an ‘inside’ perspective in this case. I should point out that one reviewer did ask whether we could ‘hear more about the sex’ in their response to Gould’s paper (2008b). In this case, I am happy to agree with Giddens that certain consumption choices ‘are individual decisions which belong within the individual sphere of autonomy’ (Giddens, 2003: 394–5) and should remain private.
3 Woodside (2006) clearly would not agree. Although I happen to think that he does
not do full justice to the widespread nature of confirmatory bias that Gould (2005) gestures toward, or that of cognitive bias more generally (i.e. ‘naïve realism’), or for that matter, the various discussions of ‘majority rules’ in theory-adjudication (see Tadajewski, 2008).

4 In addition, the work of macromarketing scholars is important here.

5 This discussion about the ‘social patterning of consumption’ and consumer choices obviously has a far longer lineage than I can give it credit for here. To take this analysis back further we could draw on Sassatelli’s work on consumption in the 18th century. In a rich historical account she remarks about the various ‘consumer practices, specific lifestyles and socially ordered patterns of choice [which] were becoming accepted as part of the new social order’ (Sassatelli, 1997: 343).

6 Holt also wants to unpack the various ‘bases of social class’, explaining ‘the key dimensions of taste and . . . their unique contribution to social reproduction’, which Bourdieu’s toolbox offers, and Warner allegedly conflated (Holt, 1998: 4).

7 I find the argument in Venkatesh (1994) a marked contrast to his later published work, especially that on ethnoconsumerism. In his 1995 publication, Venkatesh provides one of the most reflexive commentaries on the problems of ethnocentric bias, and so on. His earlier work with Firat, Dholakia and other colleagues is also some of the most important critical marketing scholarship available. I discuss this in a paper currently in preparation. Suffice to say this is not a critique of Venkatesh’s work itself but more of a tension apparent in marketing at present.

References


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Mark Tadajewski is Lecturer in Critical Marketing in the School of Management at the University of Leicester. His research has appeared in or is forthcoming in Organization, the Journal of Macromarketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Marketing Theory, among others. He has edited a number of books, including the three volume collection The History of Marketing Thought with Brian Jones (Tadajewski and Jones, 2008). Address: School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH. [email: mt66@le.ac.uk]