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The past is a foreign country: amnesia and marketing theory

Mark Tadajewski and Michael Saren
University of Leicester, UK

Abstract. This paper introduces the special issue. Using the work of Connerton (2008) as our prism, we examine the role of amnesia in marketing theory, stressing its positive and negative benefits. Key Words • amnesia • critical marketing studies • structuring of marketing theory

Introduction

In this introductory editorial we outline the rationale for this special issue, the importance of the topic and the content of the material that appears in the pages that follow. When we began to sketch out the boundaries for this issue, we noted that there were many factors that might contribute to amnesia in marketing. For the moment we define amnesia in terms of ‘memory loss’ or a ‘process of forgetting’. In terms of marketing theory and thought, we may well ask what causes amnesia. It may be the result of the fact that marketing history is rarely taught, especially at the doctoral level (Tadajewski and Jones, 2008), leading to the types of misattribution of intellectual priority that Merton (1957) diagnosed.

Equally, it could be the result of the valorization of ‘recency’ (Baker, 2001), that is, the requirement that scholars focus on recently published and ‘up to date’ studies for references and citations, with the consequence that we tend to ignore our more distant heritage. This could be exacerbated by implicit assumptions regarding the ‘progress of knowledge’ whereby later work somehow encompasses and supersedes past knowledge (Brownlie and Saren, 1995). Or it could simply be a function of time pressures, and the ‘publish or perish’ mentality that is now enshrined in marketing, like many other disciplines. Most probably it is the result of some combination of these factors.

Before we turn to introduce the papers in this issue, we should briefly contextualize the topics we thought would offer fruitful avenues for the exploration of the interconnection between amnesia and marketing theory. In our call for papers we
asked for contributions that covered a range of topics, including the relationship between marketing and geopolitical conflicts – an internal/external historical perspective that Scully (1996) and Tadajewski (2006a) lament is far too infrequently adopted in accounts of the history of marketing thought.

We were also interested in articles that examined the marginalization of marketing concepts, theories and methods. Likewise, we sought material that adopted critical theoretical perspectives in relation to some aspect of marketing theory and practice given the still marginal (Morgan, 2003; Tadajewski, 2004), but steadily growing influence of critical perspectives in marketing (e.g. Saren et al., 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008a). Connected to this theoretical focus, we hoped to secure material that examined the politics of marketing theory, itself an area that is rarely discussed, beyond occasional accounts of the peer review system (e.g. Brown, 1995; Brownlie and Saren, 1995; Svensson, 2005, 2006; Svensson and Wood, 2006; Tadajewski, 2008).

This special issue includes papers that deal with most of these topics in some form. We will weave our discussion of this material around a more general examination of amnesia, so as to highlight the centrality of amnesia and processes of forgetting that can be found in various debates relating to marketing theory and practice. It is, as we document, quite widespread.

**Structural amnesia**

Certainly, when we look at the development of marketing theory and practice through the lens provided by Connerton (2008), notably in terms of his discussions of ‘structural amnesia’ (Connerton, 2008: 64), ‘amnesia that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity’ (Connerton, 2008: 63), and ‘forgetting as planned obsolescence’ (Connerton, 2008: 66), we can begin to see both the productive and problematic nature of amnesia as it operates within the marketing academy.

In the first instance, there have been some quite obvious cases of structural amnesia, especially with regard to the development of marketing and consumer theory. Connerton (2008: 64) defines structural amnesia in terms of ‘a person remembering only those links in his or her pedigree that are socially important’. Linking this with the development of marketing for example, we should be aware of the distinct gender bias in much of our documented history (Maclaran and Stevens, 2008).

What we mean by this is that the contributions of early female marketing scholars have all too frequently been ignored. To draw on recent work by Tadajewski and Jones (2008), this was a function of the fact that the biographical accounts of the early pioneers of marketing thought that appeared in the *Journal of Marketing* were explicitly focused on ‘the distinguished men of the past’ (Bliss, in McKeon, 1960: 77). As Bedeian (2004) has argued, it is a function of the maturity of a discipline that it can recall its own history. By not acknowledging these female scholars as important contributors to the formation of our disciplinary
identity ‘it is . . . akin to mass ingratitude toward our discipline’s progenitors’ (Bedeian, 2004: 92).

Ingratitude, some would say, runs deeply in the marketing discipline in relation to the exemplary marketing scholarship and practical endeavours of Hazel Kyrk (1924, 1933), Elizabeth Hoyt (1926, 1950), Christine Frederick (1929) and Lilien Gilbreth (Graham, 1997; Tadajewski, forthcoming), among others, who were working in the field of consumer and consumption studies, championing consumer education. Yet when we turn to the series of biographical studies of prominent marketing figures, these women, despite their often prodigious output in the face of innumerable challenges, are nowhere to be seen. This really is surprising given the focus on the consumer by these early scholars (Zuckerman and Carsky, 1990).

Luckily, Zuckerman and Carsky have redressed this balance somewhat, providing an account that highlights how these female scholars were far more advanced in their knowledge of the consumer and consumption phenomena than is often documented, given their elision from accounts that promote the misleading idea that the marketing concept emerged in the 1950s (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Webster, 1988):

Marketing practitioners knew early on that they must pay attention to consumer needs, must investigate and learn about those needs. Theorists in home economics had presented major works on this topic, and practitioners wrote about it in Printer’s Ink and other publications utilized by marketing academicians in the early part of the century. (Zuckerman and Carsky, 1990: 316)

Of course, simply understanding consumer needs in this case is not quite the same as following the tenets of the marketing concept. We need only turn to the work of Lee Bristol (1932) or Percival White (1927) for relatively developed ideas consistent with the marketing concept, as it was represented in much later work. Bristol, for instance, remarked that

it is my sincere belief that the developments of the future will start from a market analysis and a discovery of needs and requirements in that market before the products are created to supply those needs. Does this not seem a more logical and orderly procedure and one that gives promise of fewer business tragedies in the future? (Bristol, 1932: 116)

And Percival White (1927) called for the marketing process to be reversed; we should not begin with production, we should start with the consumers’ requirements and work ‘backwards’, he maintained. Both of these figures are largely excised from the history of marketing thought, much like those female pioneers above (cf. Tadajewski, forthcoming; Tadajewski and Jones, 2008).

Still, the fact that marketing theory exhibits some degree of gender bias is disturbing – or at least we think so – but perhaps the elision of these female contributors serves another function, in that it lets our textbooks recount a teleological narrative that works as a counterpoint to the post-Marxist critiques of marketing practice. Here we could point to Fromm’s (1942/2002) critique of marketing and salesmanship as functioning like an opiate. Fromm, we might recall, makes the
case that we are only valued as ‘customers’, not as individuals, when we enter a
department store or other retailing outlet. As consumers we are not in control –
there is no value co-production here (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000, 2002) – it
is more like object domination. We are treated as less than human in the depart-
ment store and at the same time are dominated by the products we buy: ‘A person
is not only little, he is nothing, because he is dominated by the things and circum-
stances he himself has created . . . Modern man is constituted by the things he
creates’ (Fromm, 1998: 25).

Equally it is appropriate to register the critique of mass production and con-
sumption made by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002). Their condemnation of
‘pseudo individuality’ is particularly appropriate in this context. Marketers often
claim to offer ‘one to one’ solutions for consumers (Peppers and Rogers, 1994),
but for Adorno and Horkheimer, consumers are actually offered mass-produced
commodities that are perversely supposed to provide us with an individualized
identity which they simply do not because they clearly cannot. The result of
production, marketing and entertainment, Marcuse (1964/1972) tells us, is that
we remain firmly locked within the dominant social paradigm (Kilbourne et al.,
1997). So long as we view our lives, our satisfactions, in terms of products and
services, then why should people

insist on different institutions . . . And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that
satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to
think, feel and imagine for themselves? True, the material and mental commodities
offered might be bad, wasteful, rubbish – but Geist and knowledge are no telling argu-
ments against [the] satisfaction of needs. (Marcuse, 1964/1972: 53, emphasis in the
original)

Marketers would, of course, see things slightly differently. Far from manipulating
the customer, marketers serve the customer, and have over the last century been
working to do this ever more efficiently, ever more effectively. In this way, we can
carefully differentiate marketing from sales management and, in turn, from the
negative connotations associated with the latter. This brings us to our next type of
amnesia, which Connerton discusses in terms of

forgetting, which is constitutive in the formation of a new identity. The emphasis here is
not so much on the loss entailed in being unable to retain certain things as rather on
the gain that accrues to those who discard memories that serve no practicable purpose
in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes. Forgetting then
becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because
a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences.
(Connerton, 2008: 63, emphasis in the original)

Let us briefly see if we might look at the development of marketing in a slightly
different way, using Connerton’s discussion as our prism.
Amnesia as constitutive in the formation of a new identity

Given that we have already remarked on the questionable reliance on teleological narratives in our marketing textbooks, it is possible to frame the alleged emergence of the marketing concept in the 1950s and 1960s (Borch, 1958; Keith, 1960; Levitt, 1960; McKitterick, 1957) in terms of it performing a function much like the one that Connerton describes. Here, amnesia might function positively, in that we are constructing a new identity for marketing, one that clearly and cleanly differentiates it from earlier discussions of sales marketing (e.g. La Londe and Morrison, 1967; Tosdal, 1940).

Bringing Connerton’s argument into close connection with marketing, we might thereby refute the progressive production-sales-marketing era(s) narrative with which students are confronted, or for that matter, the well known distinction between marketing and sales forcefully documented by Levitt (1960). Our argument is that this distinction is predicated on a form of constitutive identity formation, to use Connerton’s (2008) lexicon. Indeed, this presumption of a shift from a ‘production’ to a ‘sales’ to a ‘marketing’ era is historical amnesia at its very best, as illustrated by Fullerton (1988), Hollander (1986), Jones and Richardson (2007), Tadajewski (forthcoming), Tadajewski and Jones (2008).

Lest we have forgotten, Borch (1958) explicitly pointed out that the marketing concept can be parsed into two functions and so he called it the ‘dual core’ marketing concept. One aspect, certainly, focuses attention on the customer. As he put it:

The initial part of the dual-core job is that we in marketing must focus our businesses on the customer’s needs and desires, including those needs and desires of which the customer is not aware, as well as those he knows all too well. Only after identification of these needs can marketing people lead the way for a business in determining what each function of the business should do to provide the necessary products and services to satisfy them. (Borch, 1958: 20, emphasis in the original)

It is the other side of the dual core nature of marketing that cultural and social theorists generally focus on, and which Borch feels no inclination to hide: ‘The other half of the dual-core job of marketing is one that we are familiar with – namely, the need to persuade the prospective customer, through all the arts of selling and advertising, to purchase the products and services which have been developed’ (Borch, 1958: 20).

We forget the inherent inter-linkage of these aspects perhaps because it serves our purposes, in that it legitimates marketing activities in the face of criticism of the kind levelled at marketing by the critical theorists’ (e.g. Fromm, 1976/2007). But, in equal measure, it is not only marketing theorists who experience Connerton’s constitutive form of amnesia; as individuals we may all experience something similar when consuming certain goods. Two authors have highlighted this vividly (Billig, 1999; Desmond, 1998).

Billig (1999), following Marx and Freud, has made a compelling case that our consumer society, and indeed our identity as consumers, is predicated on a form...
of collective amnesia. As he points out, the term ‘consumer society’ indicates our
cognitive distance from the origins of our expensively marketed, cheaply made
consumer goods. We focus on consumption, not production, when in reality both
are inextricably connected. This is the result of commodity fetishism, and one
beneficial aspect of our cognitive and spatial separation from the origins of those
goods that constitute part of our extended selves (Belk, 1988), is that our pleasure
as consumers is ‘maximized’ (Billig, 1999).

When we go to one of the many out of town retail superstores that pepper the
developed world, we are confronted by a carefully choreographed environment;
we see only polished brand imagery, not the ghoulish reality of export processing
zones. As Klein explains, ‘If Nike Town and the other superstores are the glittering
new gateways to branded dreamworlds, then the . . . Export Processing Zone . . . is
the branding broom cupboard’ (Klein, 2000: 202). By keeping these production
areas far away from the consumer, and understandably not referring to them if at
all possible, ‘the labour involved in the production of commodities is pushed from
awareness’ (Billig, 1999: 315).

More forcefully, Billig observes:

the social relations beyond the labels are forbidden territory. My goods, in order to be
mine and to be enjoyed as such, must be separated from the bodies which have created
them. I must not imagine those strange hands which once touched my precious
possessions, including those which lie next to my skin. (Billig, 1999: 319, emphasis in
the original)

There are good reasons for this; after all, ‘handmade’ connotes something entirely
different when you know that your clothes have been made by a child in squalid
conditions. Even though as consumers we may realise that the products we pur-
chase are made in the export processing zones bemoaned by Klein (2000), we may
still purchase them.

We can also discern other negative externalities both as antecedents and conse-
quences of the production system which are concealed to some extent from con-
sumers by the international marketing process and ‘supply chain’ (Thompson,
2004), such as raw material wastage, distorted economic development (Varman
and Vikas, 2007), labour exploitation (Klein, 2000), unfair trade and environmen-
tal damage (Crane, 2000). Are these the consequences of the modern ‘invisible
hand’ of the market (Saren, 2007)?

For Billig (1999) Freud’s concept of repression is useful in explaining our ten-
dency to continue to consume products manufactured in export processing zones.
According to Billig, we repress certain undesirable or anxiety-provoking thoughts
so that we can avoid experiencing ‘unpleasure . . . As such, repression can be
viewed as a form of willed forgetting’ (Billig, 1999: 320). Importantly, it is our
everyday lives that contribute to this ‘willed forgetting’ and marketing activities
are central aids in this regard. He explains:

In late capitalism, possibilities for [the] replacement [of undesirable thoughts], and
thus repression, are contained in the sheer volume of information and ‘busy-ness’
which characterize everyday life and constantly redirect the attention . . . The habitual
variety of programmes on the media, the newspapers bringing fresh stories daily, and the ever-changing window displays of shops offer the possibility of a socially structured replacement which permits routine and socially shared repression of the productive origins of commodities. (Billig, 1999: 326)

Some would question whether such wilful repression of thoughts into the subconscious is actually a form of amnesia or a different phenomenon of suppressed or concealed consciousness which is not technically ‘forgotten’ at the behavioural level. Whatever the semantic precision here, the danger for individuals and consumer society as a whole is that somehow the ‘return of the repressed’ (Lacan, 1977) will nevertheless manifest itself in the form of distorted or maladjusted behaviours. Could it be that this is a contributory factor in the increased occurrence of various types of consumer misbehaviour such as addictive consumption, product displacement, eating disorders, negative body image, etc. (Eccles and Hamilton, 1999; Ekström and Brembek, 2004; Elliot, 1997; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995)?

Despite Bauman’s point that we rarely ‘gaze at the consequences of our deeds’ (Bauman, 1991: 145), we remain largely cognizant of the ‘the productive origins of consumer commodities’ (Billig, 1999: 326). As consumers we might all the same feel that our actions are inconsequential – that we are ‘minor cogs’ in a complex capitalist machine (Parker, 2007) – and there is some justification for this. So the result is we do not act differently, buying fairly traded goods and so on; whether this is because we lack sufficient information to engage in informed decision making or more prosaically lack financial funds to buy them. Similarly, because our lives are so structured – we have to work a given amount of hours and so forth – it is far more difficult than we might imagine to adopt the alternative lifestyle choices proposed by the green or voluntary simplicity movement.

Even those who do join such groups, reducing, for instance, their consumption of particular modes of transportation, find that their everyday lives mitigate against their belief system (e.g. Irvine and Ponton, 1988; McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008c). Although, to be fair, some very radical green consumption advocates do manage to reduce their levels of participation in marketplace activities or involvement in environmentally deleterious consumption to levels that many can only aspire (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2008; Moisander and Personen, 2002).

Life, in other words, is very complex, and the ‘collective amnesia’ and repression that Billig (1999) describes, along with marketing activities more generally, might just help to alleviate some of the tensions and strains we feel in our everyday lives. According to Billig, marketing and advertising provide diverting entertainment options that focus our attention away from the less salubrious aspects of capitalist market relations (Billig, 1999; Desmond, 1998). Marketing can provide a certain degree of ontological structure to our everyday lives. This is not unproblematic in itself (Saren et al., 2007). As Dholakia et al. (1983) posit, our life choices and way of looking at the world is often delimited by certain macro-structural interests (e.g. neoliberalism, free markets, through to lobbying by business interests to prevent stricter environmental laws, etc.). This means that as consumers
and human beings we live within a so-called ‘political economy of social choice’ (Dholakia et al., 1983: 28), where the powerful lobby for their interests to dominate alternative perspectives (Firat, 1977; Kilbourne, 1995). Our first paper in this special issue deals with similar concerns.

Marketing, Böhm and Brei (this issue) maintain, performs an ontological function. In the case of less developed economies, marketing and all the tools of communications invoked in its name, are used to define the boundaries of development discourse. Focusing on the pulp and paper industries of South America, Böhm and Brei carefully detail how marketing is implicated in the production of hegemonic development discourses promoted by large, industrial – and heavily polluting – industries. Explicitly situating their work in the critical marketing tradition, Böhm and Brei adopt a deeply sceptical view of marketing’s role in spreading a discourse of development around the world. They remind us that hegemonic relations can be contested and in the case they discuss, there are a variety of civil society actors problematizing the representations of development circulated by the large cellulose companies on which Böhm and Brei focus.

Importantly, this paper also highlights the unintended consequences of more progressive legislative and consumer behaviours in advanced, industrial nations. Where consumers have started to adopt ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ consumption patterns in greater numbers (Tadajewski and Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2006), where environmental laws are increasingly stringent, the knock on effect of this has been that many of the heaviest polluters, especially pulp and paper manufacturers, have relocated to developing nations, which have less strict laws. This has had dramatic effects on the quality-of-life that the populations in these countries experience and understandably has led to organized resistance in these countries, as Böhm and Brei illustrate.

Our next three papers all touch upon issues that will be familiar to readers of the work of historically informed philosophers of science, such as Ludwik Fleck (1935/1979) or Thomas Kuhn (1962/1996). Kuhn, for example, presented an image of science with seriously Orwellian overtones. The history of a given discipline, Kuhn (1962/1996: 138) argues, will be rewritten when its paradigm changes: ‘For reasons that are both obvious and highly functional science textbooks (and many of the older histories of science) refer only to that part of the work of past scientists that can easily be viewed as contributions to the statement and solution of the texts’ paradigm problems’. Those people and their contributions that no longer speak to the view and vision of what science should be about are largely forgotten or ignored (Brownlie and Saren, 1997). By not speaking the language of the new paradigm, we move beyond the boundaries of acceptable discourse, as Feyerabend (1999) perceptively acknowledged.

This first issue, namely the rewriting of history and the related idea of forgetting our intellectual predecessors is not especially unusual (Tadajewski, 2006b). Ben Wooliscroft makes a similar point in his paper in this issue. He undertakes a close reading of Wroe Alderson’s (1965) posthumous work, Dynamic Marketing Behavior, selectively comparing ideas and concepts put forward by Alderson with the prize winning Journal of Marketing paper by Vargo and Lusch (2004).
According to Wooliscroft, Vargo and Lusch contribute little that extends the discussions found in Alderson’s (1965) work.

In their contribution, Henry and Caldwell examine the history of social class in marketing. Explicitly juxtaposing an important contribution that recently dealt with issues related to social class (Holt, 1998) with far earlier work, Henry and Caldwell unravel the ‘chequered history’ of these debates. Taking us back to the work of William Lloyd Warner, they discuss the paradigm defining work produced during the period 1930–50. They see a great deal of theoretical promise in this work and a substantial degree of commensurability between this and the more recent study by Holt (1998). Is this a case of the repacking of old academic work in new clothes? Henry and Caldwell answer in the affirmative and propose that ‘An area for future exploration lies in understanding the processes in which a dormant field is reinvigorated’ (cf. Tadajewski, 2006b, forthcoming).

In *Science in a Free Society*, Paul Feyerabend takes a slightly different view from that of Kuhn’s (1962) discussion of the benefits of ‘normal science’. Kuhn proposed that normal science served to advance the development of the current paradigm, in that it extended the puzzle-solving that he saw as central to science. Lest we think that Kuhn is presenting an uncritical vision of science, much as Popper (1970) believed, Kuhn was not doing so (e.g. Kuhn, 1977). He called attention to the division of labour in science and stressed the desirability of a creative tension between convergent and divergent thought. That is, while we need to be well-versed in the lexicon of the current paradigm, we should also be creative, ‘open-minded’ and ‘flexible’ enough to sometimes pursue radically alternative ways of seeking knowledge that could potentially transform our understanding of our subject matter (Kuhn, 1977: 227). Kuhn (1962/1996) does suggest, however, that relatively few people will pursue such radical directions (cf. Kuhn, 1970).

Feyerabend, as ever, takes Kuhn’s perspective to its limit. Feyerabend asserts, ‘A scientist, an artist, a citizen is not like a child who needs papa methodology and mama rationality to give him security and direction, he can take care of himself’ (Feyerabend, 1978: 38). Steve Gould’s approach to consumer research certainly chimes with Feyerabend’s view of scientific inquiry. Gould, of course, is infamous in the consumer research fraternity for running up against the limits of the seeable and sayable, even within the comparatively liberal context of the interpretive research community. In his paper, Gould recounts the development of his introspective approach, most notably paying attention to his 1991 *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) paper that brought him both acclaim and criticism.

It is for good reason that Arnould and Thompson (2005) depict him as iconoclastic, as we shall see. Indeed, Stephen Brown takes this one step further and claims that Gould’s 1991 JCR paper represents the pinnacle of originality in marketing scholarship, and moreover was a highly risky endeavour for a relatively neophyte academic. After discussing the traditional forms of neutral, scientific, dry language that marketing papers are usually couched in, Brown says:

I can honestly say that I have only once been shocked – that is, shocked as in ‘the shock of the new’, as in ‘what on Earth is this’ – by a work of marketing scholarship. Indeed, the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that Steve Gould’s (1991) paper is
the only authentic work of genius in the entire marketing canon. An introspective account of his sexual proclivities and their perceived relationship to product use, Gould’s paper has been condemned, derided, belittled, mocked and held up as an exemplar of how not to write up a research project. (Brown, 1998: 212, emphasis in the original)

Importantly, in his paper Gould details his motivation for writing the JCR piece, the commodification processes that work against the greater use of introspection in marketing, along with the politics of marketing theory and knowledge certification more generally (see also Brown, 1995; Brownlie and Saren, 1995). Certainly, Gould’s paper will provide the new researcher with some insight into the politics and mechanics of publication in marketing. As Tadajewski (2006a) illustrates, regardless of the metatheoretical and methodological pluralism that is often called for in marketing, this is no free marketplace of ideas (Maclaren and Stevens, 2008), but one monitored and policed by powerful gatekeepers with their own particular view of what constitutes an appropriate contribution in marketing (Tadajewski, 2008; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). No wonder some academics talk about sadomasochism in the review process (Holbrook, 1986).

For some time now, Gad Saad has been working at the forefront of research that demonstrates the biological origins of much consumer behaviour (e.g. Saad, 2004; Saad and Gill, 2000, 2003; Saad and Peng, 2006; see also Hirschman, 2008). Historically this is a problematic area. Biological and genetic research have had a ‘difficult’ history. This may explain why biologically based consumer research has been marginalized, in the face of the overwhelming cultural focus of much consumer research.

The polymath Francis Galton, for example, was especially interested in the role of ‘nature versus nurture’ in determining the development of certain ‘behavioural traits’ (Plomin and Asbury, 2005; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008c). Such work was influential and gradually gained support in the academy. It was also of interest to the Nazis who via their ‘abuse of genetics’ tainted the image of this approach. This combined with the rise of behaviorism limited the development of genetic science (Plomin and Asbury, 2005). Nonetheless, this is now changing and Rabinow and Rose (2006) posit that the twenty-first century will be ultimately known as the biological century, given the advances in biomedicine and neuroscience expected over this period. Others refer to this ‘era’ as that of posthuman marketing (Campbell et al., 2006).

In a critical paper, Saad argues that the lack of attention devoted to evolutionary theory and biological studies of the consumer is seriously undermining the credibility of our discipline. Evolutionary theory, he contends, is one of the most important intellectual breakthroughs of the twentieth century that has direct relevance to our understanding of the consumer. Have we forgotten, he asks, that consumer behaviour is biologically based? Taking this point further, he calls on marketing scholars to ‘address their collective amnesia and accordingly ‘remember’ that much of our purposive behaviors, cognitions, and emotions, including those manifested in the consumption arena, are instantiations of our evolved biological heritage’.
In the penultimate contribution to this special issue, Anthony Patterson, Alan Bradshaw and Stephen Brown propose that amnesia is, in fact, beneficial to marketing practitioners, scholars and consumers alike. Drawing on various disciplinary sources they question the extent to which we do really remember the past, as it was. Marketers, after all, manipulate idealised images of the past in their attempts to sell retro-products to modern harried consumers (Brown, 2001). To some extent then, the past provides consumers with a psychological comfort blanket against the stresses and strains of everyday life (Brown, 2001; Maclaran and Brown, 2005).

However, marketing, for Patterson et al., does not actually foster amnesiastic tendencies (cf. Billig, 1999). Rather, it reduces them. Heritage parks, they propose, are ‘repositories of selective cultural memory’. Covering a wide range of material, from multiple disciplines, their argument then reverts back to the world of marketing academia; and related to this, they put forward a rather provocative thesis: ‘much of the current output [of marketing literature] is inherently forgettable’. It adds little to our knowledge of marketing phenomena and is largely incremental in nature. Moreover, marketing scholars, never mind practitioners, have little chance of reading the huge amount of literature that pours forth from the academy annually. Nor would many practitioners want to. After all, as Hirschman (1986) reminds us, the managerial implications section of most marketing articles is tacked on at the end of the writing process, simply to satisfy the ‘relevance’ criterion (cf. Wensley, 2007).

The final paper is by Mark Tadajewski. He selectively examines the contents of the special issue by looking at the structure of the marketing academy, and discusses how theory enables us to make sense of the world, whilst closing down alternative ways of thinking about marketing.

The papers in this special issue all illustrate the extent to which our activities as marketing scholars, practitioners and consumers are predicated on various forms of amnesia. In some cases forgetting serves a beneficial function. In others less so, as marketing historians testify. Whatever the view held on this topic, we hope that reading the content of this special issue will not be the kind of instantly forgettable experience that Patterson et al. equate with much of the marketing literature.

Notes

Please address any correspondence to Mark Tadajewski.

1 Although for the sake of clarity we should note that by this time Fromm had broken away from his former colleagues like Adorno, who attributed Fromm’s relatively optimistic view of human nature to American demands for ‘shallow optimism and “positive thinking”’ (Ingleby, in Fromm, 1956/2002: xxiii).

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Mark Tadajewski is Lecturer in Critical Marketing in the School of Management at the University of Leicester. His research interests are wide-ranging and include the history of marketing theory and thought, the philosophy of science as it relates to marketing, critical theory and consumer research, amongst others. He is the editor of Critical Marketing: Issues in Contemporary Marketing with Douglas Brownlie published by Wiley (2008). Address: School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH.  
[Email: mt66@le.ac.uk]

Michael Saren is Professor of Marketing at Leicester University. He has a doctorate from University of Bath and previously held Chairs in Marketing at the Universities of Stirling and Strathclyde. His research covers the marketing of technology, critical marketing, consumer culture and marketing theory. He is a founding editor of the journal Marketing Theory and co-author with David Ford of Marketing and Managing Technology (Thomson Business Press, 2001) and co-editor of Rethinking Marketing (Sage Publications, 1999). He has been a convener of the Marketing Stream at the first five Critical Management Studies International Conferences, 1999–2007 and a member of the organizing committee for the European Association of Consumer Research conferences in 2005 and 2007. He was one of the ‘Gang of Six’ who ran the ESRC Seminar Series and edited a book on Critical Marketing: Defining the Field (Elsevier, 2007). His introductory text is Marketing Graffiti: The View from the Street (Butterworth Heinemann, 2006). Address: School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH. [Email: majs1@le.ac.uk]