THE FUTURE IS PAST

Marketing, apocalypse and the retreat from utopia

Stephen Brown and Pauline Maclean

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, a famous British marketing guru used to travel around the
country entertaining the hitherto unenlightened with a presentation on the so-
called oxymorons of marketing. After extracting a few cheap laughs with the
familiar classics of the genre – ‘military intelligence’, ‘postal service’, ‘airline
food’ or, doubtless if he were doing it today, ‘royal family’ – he would then
explain to the audience that apparent contradictions in terms like ‘marketing
planning’, ‘marketing strategy’ and ‘marketing philosophy’, were not only per-
fectly logical and ultimately attainable, but nothing less than the very secret of
long-term success in business. True, he never addressed that most contradic-
tory oxymoron of all – ‘British marketing guru’ – yet he did at least manage to
persuade his listeners to reflect momentarily on the importance of adopting a
marketing orientation.

At first glance, the title of this chapter might suggest some sort of oxymo-
oronic imbroglio. Apart from the pretentious temporal transposition, almost
every conceivable terminological combination – ‘marketing apocalypse’,
‘utopia-apocalypse’, ‘marketing utopia’ – is inherently contradictory. Marketing
apocalypse, for example, carries connotations of mendacious tele-evangelists
filling the heads and emptying the wallets of their credulous followers, an exercise
in exortion that is the complete opposite of what marketing is widely believed to
be about. Apocalypse and utopia are equally antithetical, in that the former
term is tarred with death, destruction and dereliction, whereas the latter calls up
pastoral images of peace, purity and Edenic perfection. However, just as the
British marketing guru sought to demonstrate the relevance of his oxymorons,
so too the first chapter of this book argued that, far from being charlatans, tele-
evangelists are the very epitome of a marketing orientation. While not to
everyone’s taste, they invariably succeed in giving their customers exactly what
they want – blood-curdling predictions of the end, the prospect of eternal
salvation and, most importantly of all, the enormous pleasure that comes from
imagining the fiery fate awaiting doubters, sinners and apostates. In a similar
vein, the terms apocalypse and utopia are nothing less than two sides of the
same coin. As Fenzensberger (1978) emphasises, the eschatological idea of the
end is never absolute or final, but merely a prelude to some sort of paradisiacal
thereafter. ‘The idea of the apocalypse has accompanied utopian thought since
its first beginnings, pursuing it like a shadow, like a reverse side that cannot be
left behind: without catastrophe, no millennium, without apocalypse, no para-
dise’ (Fenzensberger 1978: 74).

If our first two prospective oxymorons are relatively easily explicated, the
same cannot be said about ‘marketing utopia’. Utopians, as everyone knows, are
impractical, unrealistic, otherworldly dreamers, an accusation that has rarely, if
ever, been levelled at marketing practitioners. Nor, for that matter, is the appli-
cation applicable to the vast majority of marketing academics, who tend to
pride themselves on being in touch with the ‘real world’ of practising manipu-
ators (although few practitioners appear to appreciate the endeavours of their schol-
arily succubi). What is more, the briefest acquaintance with the manifold
literary utopias reveals that their authors, as a rule, are implacably opposed to
the marketing system. Indeed, some of the most celebrated utopias of all time
were directly inspired by iniquities perpetrated in marketing’s name, or what
would now be considered to be marketing’s name. It would seem, then, that the
terms ‘marketing’ and ‘utopia’ are completely contradictory, utterly opposed,
the very mother of all oxymorons.

This chapter, however, will attempt to demonstrate that not only is market-
ing irredeemably utopian, but that this underpinning Arcadian urge provides a
means of comprehending the copious alternative futures postulated at the Market-
ing Eschatology Retreat, upon which this volume is based. In keeping with the
time-honoured tripartite schema, our discussion commences with a potted his-
tory of Utopia; continues with a description of ‘Arcadia’, the utopian world that
marketers inhabit; and concludes with a consideration of the Eschatology Retreat
itself, which in many ways exemplified marketing’s innate utopian propensity.

A SHORT HISTORY OF UTOPIA

If, as Nietzsche claims, only that which is without history can be defined, then
Utopia lies far beyond definition, since it has a long, distinguished and disputa-
tious history. Although the word was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516,
when he conflated the Greek terms οὐτοπία (no place) and οὐτοπία (good place),
the concept of a perfect world long predates the fictional island described by
More’s narrator, Raphael Hythloday. A paradisal state is not only an essential
element of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its initial Garden of Eden and
eventual City of God (not to mention the inter-regnum of earthly bliss that is
the millennium), but it also forms part of our Greco-Roman heritage, be it
Homeric’s Phleisium, Plato’s ideal city, Virgil’s Arcadia or Hesiod’s golden age
(Manuel 1971a). Indeed, as Kumar (1991) makes clear, utopian-style milieux are
a commonplace in most non-western cultures, though these tend to be religious
or cosmological in character rather than codified in literary terms. Differences
in forms of expression aside, and notwithstanding the risk of gross over-
generalization, it can be contended that just as the idea of the end of the world
possesses universal appeal, so too the utopian predisposition is ubiquitous (Alex-

Regardless of their manifold forerunners, precursors and antecedents, it is
generally accepted that Utopias, as distinctive literary genre, are a product of
the Renaissance (Marin 1993). Stimulated in part by contemporaneous voy-
geages of discovery - Columbus, Magellan, Vespucci, Drake, etc. - all manner
of imaginary cities, valleys, islands, gardens and communities were explored in
the wake of More's Utopia (Kumar 1987). Over the ensuing centuries, indeed,
the realm of King Utopos expanded at an exponential rate, so to speak.
According to the Manuels' magisterial compendium, utopianism flour-
ished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reached its apex in the
nineteenth, and has tended to decline somewhat in the twentieth. In all, they
identify seven 'constellations' of utopian thought in the western tradition.
These range from ancient and medieval wellsprings, of which the Josephite
age of the spirit is a prime example, through Christian and Enlightenment
utopias, such as Bacon's New Atlantis and Campanella's City of the Sun, to the
monumental endeavours of the great system builders of the industrial revolu-
tion like Comte, Saint-Simon and, above all, Marx (Manuel and Manuel 1979).

Clearly, the sheer number and staggering diversity of textual utopias, coupled
with the very fluid boundaries of the genre, render any attempt at generalisation
highly problematic. A host of typologies and classifications have been
posited - soft utopias, hard utopias, sensate utopias, spiritual utopias, aristo-
cratic utopias, plebeian utopias, collectivist utopias, individualist utopias and
many more besides. Yet, despite the synoptic difficulties, it is arguable that
three basic utopian forms, each of which is associated with a distinctive stage in
the development of the literary corpus, can be discerned (see Manuel 1971a).
The classical utopias of the Morean type tend to begin with a journey or
departure, usually by sea, which is interrupted or diverted, often by a storm,
and which enables the protagonist to stumble upon the utopia in question.
Welcome as a visitor, the narrator proceeds to describe the lineaments of the
host society and the details of its day-to-day functioning. In complete contrast
to the world that has been left behind, with all its sorrows, squabbles, dis-
comforts, imperfections and unpleasantness, such societies are invariably happy,
harmonious, congenial, content and perfect in almost every detail. Carefully
planned, totally integrated and with every conceivable human need - food,
safety, social status, youth, beauty, sexual prowess, etc. - adequately catered for,
the imagined society comprises a veritable heaven on earth, a place where time
stands still, a haven from which the traveller has reluctantly returned to recount
his tale, usually in the past narrative tense (Kumar 1991).

In addition to the travelogue variant of the utopian schema, as initiated by
More, replicated by his innumerable imitators and modifications of which are
still being written, the nineteenth century in particular witnessed the emergence

of a second utopian form. Exemplified by the grand progressivist teleologies
of Henri Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, with their respective
reflections on 'industrial society', 'positive society' and 'communist society',
these utopian visions share many of the characteristics of the archetypal first
phase schema - harmony, integration, happiness, emancipation, communitar-
ianism and an underpinning belief in the ultimate perfectibility of humankind.
However, they also differ in several significant respects. In the first instance,
detailed descriptions of the minutiae, the texture, the warp and weft of every-
da-day life in the envisaged society are conspicuous by their absence. As Marx
famously remarked on his contemptuous dismissal of such speculations, 'I write
no recipes for the cookshops of the future.' Second, the societies being por-
trayed are not, in the main, confined to a limited geographical area, such as the
blessed island or secret valley of the prototypical utopia. They tend, rather, to
be much more ambitious - frequently universal or potentially universal - in
their geographical scope. Third and most importantly, these depictions of the
ideal society are not displaced in space (i.e. a hitherto undiscovered land or
isolated settlement, on the edge of the known world), but positioned at a future
point in time. Unlike the classic utopia, which deals with a perfect, albeit
inaccessible, world as it is, the utopian theorists sketch a society as it could, should
and, given the necessary commitment, would be (Bann 1993).

Although it has many antecedents, most notably Swift's Gulliver's Travels and
Butler's Erewhon, the third category of utopia is primarily a product of the
nineteenth century. Various descriptions were dystopias, anti-utopias, counter-
utopias, contra-topias, kakotopias and sub-topias, these comprise a complete
inversion, a sort of grotesque mirror image, of the paradisical original (Kumar
1987). Incarnated in celebrated works like Orwell's 1984, Huxley's Brave New
World and Zamiatin's We, not to mention the novels of J.G. Ballard or the
cyberpunk strand of science fiction (Broderick 1995), such imagined societies
are invariably nightmarish, desolate, terrifying, hostile, barbaric, totalitarian,
regressive, anarchistic, pessimistic and utterly devoid of 'humanity', in its broad-
est sense. They offer, in short, 'a chilling vision of an alienated and enslaved
world' (Kumar 1991: 27). So pervasive is this dystopic perspective indeed, that
many commentators consider the twentieth century in general and the late-
twentieth century in particular to be characterised by a wholesale retreat from
utopia (Kumar 1995a). This capitulation is exemplified by the ignominious
collapse of the great practical utopian experiments - principally those in the
former Soviet empire - and the cynical posturing of postmodern intellectuals,
who express nothing but absolute disdain for grand narratives, the Enlighten-
ment project and the progressivist trajectory of modernity. In complete con-
trast to the optimistic, forward-looking, onward and upward ethos of the
nineteenth-century utopians, a mood of dystopian negativity, entropy, ennui
and ironic indifference now seems to prevail (Brown 1995; Kumar 1995b;
Cahoon 1996).

Despite its latter-day buffeting and dramatic retreat from the intellectual high
ground, the utopian predisposition remains very much alive. Contemporary utopias, however, tend to appeal to a comparatively limited constituency – feminism, ecology, drug culture, resurgent nationalism, new age religious and quasi-religious cults, etc. – or come in the form of the rose-tinted worlds of romantic fiction and television soap opera (Frankel 1987; Ayers 1993; Lebergott 1993; Relf 1993; Levin 1994). Even postmodernists offer a variation on the utopian theme with their ‘vision of a neo-tribal paradise in which a set of spatially set forms of life carry on experiments, each in their own culture’ (Lash and Friedman 1992: 1). By abandoning the high-modernist notion of a future paradise and, in effect, relocating utopia from a point in time to a place in space (e.g. cultures, movements, the body, local narratives), contemporary thinkers in many ways appear to be reverting to the older, pre-eighteenth-century, spatial forms of utopia, the type propounded by More and his countless disciples (Bann 1993).

**MARCADIA POSTPONED**

As a rule, commercial life rarely intrudes into literary utopias. Compared to the lengthy discussions of law, politics, religion, education, science, art, diet, customs, family affairs, social conditions and urban planning, utopian evocations of idealised marketing arrangements are few and far between. This reticence, it must be emphasised, is not simply another instance of the marketer’s perennial complaint; the fact that everyone ignores, underestimates, or devalues the marketing system, despite its immense importance to the functioning of the economy as a whole. It tends, rather, to be overlooked in the utopian literature because commercial life in all its manifestations – buying, selling, borrowing, lending, foreclosing, speculation, profiteering, cut-throat competition or whatever – is considered to be inimical to the good life. Marketing merely raises expectations, fosters consumer desire, encourages frivolous or unwarranted expenditure and exploits pernicious human frailties like pride, sloth, cupidity, covetousness, greed, selfishness, concupiscence, fashion consciousness and so on (Campbell 1987; Berry 1994).

Marketing, in short, is considered to be part of the problem, not part of the utopian solution. Many literary utopias either circumvent the marketing system completely or assign its custodianship to the lowest orders of society. For example, in Cockayne, the apexical poor man’s haven (akin to the ‘Big Rock Candy Mountain’ of the popular song), the rivers run with wine, a fountain of youth is permanently on tap and perfectly cooked morsels of food drop straight into the sybaritic inhabitants’ mouths. In Aristotle’s vision of the ideal city, trading-related activities are undertaken by ‘those weakest in body and unfit for any other work’. In More’s *Utopia*, such is the disdain for precious commodities and personal possessions that the principal use for gold, silver, jewels and suchlike is in the manufacture of spitoons and chamberpots. Similarly, the former travelling salesman, Charles Fourier – variously described as ‘a madman’ (Levin 1994: 26) and the ‘greatest utopian after More’ (Manuel 1971a: 132) – managed to find inspiration in the apparent inequitities of the marketing system. Struck by the exorbitant price of an apple in a Parisian shop, he concluded that existing socio-economic arrangements were hopelessly corrupt and thereafter devoted his life to the (ultimately unsuccessful) promulgation of an alternative utopian society known as the ‘phalanstery’ (Neville-Sington and Sington 1993).

Although, as Rooney (1985) has shown in his content analysis of ninety-one American utopias, the vast majority of authors either consider the marketing system to be a significant social problem or simply fail to discuss it in detail, there are at least two major exceptions to this general rule. Written at the end of the nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* not only anticipates the modern credit card, champions the use of domestic servants and advocates unshackled competition (in the form of free trade), but it comprises an extended panegyric to the department store, then at the very height of its opulence and success. Bellamy’s vision of a national store chain dispenses with the usual, substandard customer services provided by unsatisfactory sales personnel and replaces them with perfect clerks who process every order perfectly and thanks to whom satisfaction is invariably guaranteed. Equally detailed in its depiction of a marketing saturated society is Aldous Huxley’s celebrated dystopia, *Brave New World*. Unbridled consumption, indeed, is deemed to be a vital social duty of its inhabitants, as is ‘self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning.’ Indocilibrated from birth by means of ‘hypnopedia’, a process whereby slogans are repeated over and over again to infants as they sleep – and recalled during adulthood at moments of existential doubt concerning consumption – these aphorisms include ‘we always throw away old clothes’, ‘ending is better than mending’ and ‘the more stitches, the less riches’.

While it is undeniable that Huxley’s dystopian depiction of a society predicated on sex, drugs and naked hedonism is widely read as a utopia nowadays and Bellamy’s prophetic novel, albeit today almost forgotten, proved to be one of the best-selling utopias of all time (a successful political movement, the Nationalists, sprang up in its wake and Bellamy himself was persuaded to stand for election), it is fair to conclude that utopian endorsements of the marketing system are conspicuous by their absence. For most utopians, and commentators on utopia, commercial life in all its forms comprises the complete antithesis of the good society, the perfect commonwealth, the utopian ideal. Thus, Martin famously described Disneyland as a ‘degenerate utopia’ (see Bann 1993); the McDonald’s experience – McTopia – has been depicted in grotesque, nightmarish terms (O’Neill 1993); and Metrocentre, one of the largest shopping centres in Europe, damned as subtopia in Gateshead (Chaney 1990).

Disappointingly ubiquitous though it is, the utopians’ manifest disdain for the marketing system is deeply ironic. The undeniable popularity and staggering commercial success of emblematic marketing institutions like Disneyland, McDonalds and Metrocentre, suggests that while they may not meet with the
approval of the intellectual elite, they nonetheless perform an essentially utopian or quasi-utopian function for their countless satisfied customers. Such establishments, after all, comprise clean, safe, family-orientated fantasy environments which offer a momentary escape from the frustrations, imperfections and disappointments of everyday life. Granted, the brute reality of their crowds, queues and exorbitant prices is anything but utopian, yet the image they cultivate, circulate and rigidly control is nothing less than a contemporary Cockaigne, a latter-day Elysium, a Big Rock Candy Space Mountain. If, moreover, the very essence of marketing is the development, dissemination, and manipulation of image, as many commentators maintain (Baudrillard 1988; York and Jennings 1995), then it follows that the creation of utopias, or utopian surrogates, is marketing’s raison d’être. With its boundless ability to invent imaginatory worlds of perfect appearances, perfect personal relationships, perfect families, perfect personalities, perfect careers, perfect holidays, perfect presents, perfect pizzas, perfectly pulled pints and perfect imperfections (Brown 1995: 137), marketing more than any other contemporary cultural institution is arguably the keeper of the late-twentieth-century utopian flame. The archetypal marketing utopias of fresh breath, clean clothing, shiny hair, safe sex and instant credit (aptly dubbed the “never-never” by earlier generations of consumers) may be less grandiose than the visions of universal utopian transformation propounded by the great nineteenth-century utopian prophets, but this too is very much in keeping with the low-key tenor of our chastened post-modern times (Kumar 1995b).

Just as the practices of marketing involve the creation, stimulation and exploitation of our utopian appetites — all the way from the impeccable “dream world” of the department store, through the sale of products with a utopian pedigree (such as Oneida furniture or Kelloggs corn flakes), to the evanescent and ephemeral promised by advertisers of extra-soft toilet tissue — so too marketing theory and thought has a decidedly arcadian aspect. The very notion of a marketing orientation, with its ambition of perfectly satisfied, not to say delighted, customers, whose every conceivable want or need is anticipated, investigated and accommodated by perennially profitable companies, which are fully integrated around the marketing function and where careful analysis, planning, implementation and control are the orders of the day, is nothing less than a utopian hallucination that is utterly preposterous, some would say megalomaniac, in its ambition and scope. Call it what you will — Martopia, Paradisic, Markedenn, Madlennium, Mariysium, Markanad, Marcanaa — but this Marcadian vision makes the world of homo economicus look positively naturalistic by comparison.

The utopian propensity within marketing thought is not of course confined to its overall ethos or orientation. On the contrary, marketing is suffused with utopianism at almost every level. It is apparent at the macro-level, in the form of the societal and generic marketing concepts (become a marketer and save the world or, if not, apply the metaphor to everything that moves); it is extant at the meso-level, as exemplified by the chimerical pursuit of a “general theory” or the honorific appellation ‘science’ (the latter is doubly idealistic since science itself is irreparably utopian); it is discernible at the micro-level, in myriad pointless attempts to develop better, superior or more comprehensive marketing models (variations on the stages theory of internationalisation, product life cycle, strategic frameworks, hierarchy of advertising effects, etc.); and it is all too evident at the honey-I-shrank-the-discipline level (almost anything written by Malcolm McDonald or Shelby Hunt).

Even marketing’s inordinate fondness for importing concepts from adjacent disciplines is infused with utopian inclinations, whether it be Maslow’s familiar hierarchy of needs, B.F. Skinner’s (consumer) behaviourist paradigm, Koder’s three levels of marketing consciousness or the work of the renowned retailing theorist, Malcolm P. McNair. Maslow was a well-known euphoric, Skinner wrote a best-selling utopia, Walden Two, Koder’s consciousness raising is clearly indebted to the likes of Teilhard de Chardin and McNair was profoundly affected by the work of fellow Bostonian-cum-retailing enthusiast, Edward Bellamy. Perhaps the most striking conceptual example of marketing utopianism, however, is found in those ubiquitous textbook diagrams of marketing functions or marketing’s co-ordinating role within the firm (Figure 14.1). Circular, concentric and symmetrical, sometimes with radial elements, these are an almost exact replica of utopian representations of the ideal city, most notably Campenella’s city of the sun. Of course, in their modern marketing equivalent, that which is most sacred — the customer — occupies the very centre of the circle and this holy-of-holies is surrounded by functionally sub-divided zones of steadily decreasing significance, over which control is less easily exercised or exercisable.

It almost goes without saying that this utopian inclination within marketing is largely attributable to American hegemony. The marketing academy is

![Figure 14.1 Marketing functions and co-ordinating role](sources: Brown 1987; Dibb et al. 1994)
completely dominated by North American scholarship, much to the annoyance of certain Europeans (Gummesson 1993), and as utopianism has had an enormously important influence upon America's self-image and worldview — Pilgrim fathers, Declaration of Independence, Mormon Trek, nineteenth-century model communities, light unto the nations, Land of the Free, etc. etc. etc. — it is perhaps not surprising that this penchant has insinuated itself deeply into marketing thought. Indeed, when the history of modern American marketing scholarship is examined, the three-stage developmental schema of utopianism, previously described, can be readily discerned. It is blindly obvious, for example, that the earliest postwar explications of the marketing concept, such as those by Keith (1960) and McKitterick (1958), are absolute exemplars of the Morean blessed isle, traveller's tale, speaking picture, utopian tradition. They describe, usually in the past narrative tense, a single, isolated company that has miraculously found the secret of success in business, where customers are sated, profits illimitable and everything in the garden of marketing delights is rosy. The basic message, in effect, is that Marcadia exists, albeit somewhere over the rainbow.

In a similar vein, the universal, progressivist, 'someday my prince will come', second stage of marketing utopianism is apparent in the 'broadening' debate of the 1970s and the subsequent 'globalisation' hypothesis (Kotler and Levy 1969; Luck 1969; Kotler 1972; Levitt 1983). Here, the gates of Marcadia were thrown open to every sphere of activity — profit, not-for-profit, societal and so on — though the ultimate paradise of marketing orientation (or world domination!) was carefully positioned at a future point in time and only available to those who wish hard enough, really, really believe in it and are prepared to live by the all-important magic words, 'the customer is always right' (e.g. Figure 14.2). Of late, moreover, the third, dystopian, 'we're on the road to nowhere' stage of marketing development has come very much to the fore. Apart from the advent of 'shock-horror' advertising campaigns (e.g. Beneton) and the imperialistic, not to say totalitarian, propensity that undergirds concepts like 'internal marketing' (Whittington and Whipp 1992), the intellectual and philosophical premises of the discipline itself are being attacked on all fronts (e.g. Percey 1992; Wensley 1990, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Doyle 1995). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that the shiny second-phase vision of a marketing millennium — an eschaton of marketing orientation that will eventually come to pass — has been superseded by a somewhat retrospective inclination. We now look back on the late 1960s as a sort of golden age, a pre-lapidarian marketing paradise, a garden of markeden, from which today's academic backsliders have been forever and no doubt deservedly expelled.

**THE RETREAT FROM UTOPIA**

The trajectory of modern marketing thought may parallel the evolution of utopianism, from imagined other, through teleological consummation, to de-

---

**Figure 14.2 The growth of marketing in the firm**

Source: Carson 1985

---

...featist abandon, but the retreat from Marcadia is by no means complete. Just as the utopian proclivity still survives in the late-twentieth century, albeit in a fragmented, decentralised, spatially circumscribed form, so too utopian visions of the land of marketing milk and honey continue to circulate. In keeping with contemporary conceptions of utopia, these tend to appeal to a comparatively limited constituency — critical theory, aesthetics, feminism, ecology and the like — and are essentially spatial rather than temporal in orientation. Perhaps the clearest example of this propensity is found in the relationship marketing paradigm, which, while far from universally espoused, is probably the most heavily-backed runner in today's Marcadian Derby. As Figure 14.3 indicates, the elements of the prototypical relationship marketing network are invariably placed in a distinctive spatial arrangement around the hub of the system, though the latter may be absent or decentralised, as in the oft-cited case of so-called 'hollow' corporations. This spatial arrangement, what is more, carries clear paradisical connotations since it patently resembles the radiating rays of numinous celestial light that have for centuries signified heaven, saints, angels and spiritual enlightenment in countless artistic representations of the ghotid. It is, in short, a marchtype.

Although relationship marketing is worshipped by many marcdians at present, not least on account of its ostensibly communal, co-operative, egalitarian ethos of all-pervasive harmony, it is not the only serpent in the Garden of Markeden. A glance through the preceding chapters in this book reveals all manner of
Martopian possibilities – Brown's postmodern Pandemonium, McDonagh and Prothero's eco-friendly resurrection, Belk's heavenly hope, Brownie and Desmond's con-artist manifesto, Heilbrunn's narratological teleology, Kent's phenomenological paradise, Buttimer and Kavanagh's Elysium of the extreme, Teillard de Chardin's mammalsphere, Thomas's crusade for scientific respectability, O'Donohoe's ethnographic Erewhon, Catterall et al.'s feminist fable, Holbrook's catalogical cataclysm and, not least, Brown and Macalaran's hopelessly idealistic notion of Maradia. This is not the place to criticise or deconstruct these utopian options, though an attempt to reveal the hidden truth about such attempts to reveal the hidden truth about the hidden truth of marketing – a sort of marketing triposcalypse – would be very much in keeping with the spirit of the present volume. Indeed, critics, cynics and casual readers may well conclude that for a book which sets out to dance on the grave of marketing, this text has simply served to celebrate the discipline's continuing rude health.

Legitimate though it is, such an interpretation overlooks the essential point about terminal visions per se. The very act of exploring the ostensible final frontier permits us, in effect, to boldly go where no-one has gone before (and split the infinitive for good measure). It opens up hieratic occluded academic vistas, offers tantalising glimpses of scholarly oases, shimmering through the heat-haze on the intellectual horizon, and, by raising the exhilarating possibility of closure only to eclipse it with a new beginning, succeeds in temporarily elevating us from the quotidian round of routine research to the eternal realm of the transcendent. Granted, this suggestion of a metaphysical marketing moment may strike many readers as postmodern posturing at its most preposterous, but it was discernible during the Marketing Eschatology Retreat, from whence this volume derives. As anyone who attended the gathering will willingly testify, it comprised a three-day idyll of academic accomplishment and harmonious co-existence, interspersed with periodic visitations of awe-struck wonder, occasional flashes of capture and fleeting episodes of communal communion. Much of this Arcadian atmosphere was doubtless attributable to the venue (Figure 14.4). Set high on a hill, in a seemingly isolated, otherworldly location, which is reached by a long and winding approach road through verdant, pastoral surroundings, St Clement's is a place dedicated to worship and contemplation, a cosmic off-cut, a slice from the sublime, a veritable piece of heaven on earth. Be that as it may; for many delegates the Marketing Eschatology Retreat was nothing less than a utopian experience where, according to one attendee, time stood still (Wright 1995). Another stated that it 'restored my faith in what I thought academic life was all about' (Rees 1995). And yet another, appropriately enough, was moved to adopt the ringing declaration of that great nineteenth-century utopian, Karl Marx, 'marketing academics of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains' (Stevens 1995).

In retrospect, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Retreat from Utopia was the total unanimity that the end of marketing was not nigh. Despite the conference theme and the apocalyptic 'call for papers', not a single speaker,
out of twenty-six in total, concluded that marketing had attained its eschaton. On the contrary, the event was more akin to a eulogy than an elegy. Marketing was not only alive and well, it was kicking! Naturally, this atmosphere of utopian euphoria could simply be dismissed as sectarian self-interest – are marketing academics really prepared to pull the ontological rug from under their own feet? – but the attendant air of intellectual intoxication was so palpable that an alternative explanation must be sought. In this respect, it is worthwhile recalling a famous 1950s study of an apocalyptic sect that anticipated the imminent end of the world, When Prophecy Fails. Although Festinger et al.'s (1956) work has been severely criticised on ethical grounds – the researchers secretly infiltrated the cult and directly participated in the events as they unfolded – the exercise produced some compelling findings. The most intriguing of these was that when the prophesied cataclysm failed to occur on the expected day, the faith of the membership was not dented, disillusionment did not set in and, contrary to expectation, the disappointed believers did not dissever in disarray. Quite the reverse. Their belief in themselves and the imminence of the (inexplicably delayed) end was reinforced. So much so, that they redoubled their proselytising activities thereafter. Thus, in spite of the clear disconfirming evidence, the adherents responded with renewed vigour, with increased conviction and an overwhelming desire to convince the sceptics of the righteousness of their cause.

If these findings are accepted at face value – and several studies of end-times movements have come to much the same conclusions (Hamilton 1995) – the implications for marketing are clear. After Festinger, it can be contended that in spite of the ample, some would say overwhelming, evidence of the utter failure of marketing, of its intellectual bankruptcy, of its manifold inadequacies, of its incipient end, true believers will respond to the evidence of disconfirmation with optimism, with renewed vigour, with the absolute conviction that marketing – its miscalculations and errors of omission notwithstanding – is still a worthwhile pursuit. Thus, it is arguable that the enthusiasm expressed at the Eschatology Retreat is the clearest evidence yet that the end of marketing has occurred. Just as Shelby Hunt (1976) assumed he was celebrating marketing’s coming of age when he was actually presiding over its Last Rights, so too the academic fanfares blown at the Eschatology Retreat were in fact marketing’s Last Post – marketing’s at long last post.5

CONCLUSION

Although it is easy to dismiss the entire corpus of utopian thought as mere works of fiction, as figments of overactive literary imaginations, as irrelevant to the everyday concerns of marketing academics and practitioners, it is nevertheless possible to extract some suitably apocalyptic conclusions from the marcadian retreat. When the unfolding historical drama of utopianism is examined, it is fair to say that marketing does not play a leading role. If anything, indeed, it is presented as the villain of the piece rather than the romantic hero. Although this antagonistic view of the marketing system is very much in keeping with the western intellectual tradition, such utopia myopia overlooks the positive side of marketing, the fact that despite the torrent of abuse heaped upon its head (often justifiably), it is a vitally necessary intermediary between production and consumption. In addition to this functional argument, however, it is apparent that utopianism pervades much of marketing practice and thought. Like it or not, our late-twentieth-century vision of the good life is either a marketing creation (Disneyland, Las Vegas) or mediated by marketing (the product as passport to an imagined world) or indeed both. What, after all, is the holiday ‘promise’ of Club 18–30 but a sexual utopia of the most lurid, licentious and lascivious kind? Marketing concepts and principles are no less parasitical since they envisage perfect organisations with carefully co-ordinated marketing mixes, minutely detailed marketing plans, totally amicable inter-functional relationships, meticulously executed competitive strategies and absolutely unshakable customer orientated convictions. Mainstream marketing academics may not be prepared to admit it, but these portrayals are just as fantastic, fanciful and far-fetched as the marcadia, the martopia, the ‘lovely-land’ that is marketed to the masses (York and Jennings 1995).

If, in short, the vast majority of today’s utopias are marketing inflicted and the most active disseminators of contemporary visions of ‘the perfect family’, ‘the ideal society’ and, not least, ‘the customer-orientated organisation’ are marketing practitioners and theorists, then it follows that the utopians’ long-standing disdain for the marketing system is somewhat misplaced, to put it
mildly. It can quite legitimately be argued that utopia is no longer lost and found, it is bought and sold.

For many late-twentieth-century commentators, however, the rise of marketing-saturated consumer society is less an exemplar of the 'good place' version of utopia than the 'no place' dystopian propensity. In fact, it is fair to say that, for the current generation of intellectuals, the very concept of utopia is hopelessly compromised and irredeemably tainted. Thanks to the barbarities perpetrated in pursuit of the ideal society – Auschwitz, the Gulag, Tiananmen Square, ethnic cleansing, etc. – today's thinkers are increasingly inclined to stress the dark, dictatorial, totalitarian, fascist side of the utopian impulse. Even Oscar Wilde's celebrated panegyric to utopia is readily interpretable in imperialistic terms – 'a map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the country at which humanity is always hoping. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of utopias.'

Nevertheless, as Wilde also implies, it is arguable that the fundamental problem with utopia is not the vision itself. On the contrary, dreams of utopia are important and necessary. They are a call to metaphorical (and often literal) arms. According to Levitas (1990), indeed, utopianism is part of the collective unconscious and represents a deep-seated need within humankind to strive for perfection, for something better, for something above and beyond the sadly deficient all-too-imperfect present. It is, in effect, a primal urge that dates from the dawn of history and which is made manifest in many ways, shapes and forms ranging from the colony of hermaphroditic nudists envisaged by a seventeenth-century monk, Gabriel de Foigny, to the prospect of untold wealth and happiness currently obtainable for the paltry price of a National Lottery ticket. Most importantly, all of these utopias perform a vital didactic function. They not only offer an arresting vision of future possibilities, but because they tend to be written in the past narrative tense, also imply that their depiction of the good life, an ideal world, is eminently attainable. It has already been achieved. The future is past. But – and this is a very big but – the history of utopianism clearly demonstrates that every attempt to enact, attain or realise a utopian vision has failed and failed ignominiously. Utopias, in fact, can't be achieved because a utopia achieved is no longer a utopia (Kumar 1993; Baudrillard 1994).

Despite the cavils of dyspeptic postmodern intellectuals, and the sorry history of utopianism, it can be contended that marketing and the marketing concept are compelling utopias, utopias that are truly astonishing in their attraction and power, utopias that dominate our lives both as commentators on and participants in the marketing system. Marketing, indeed, can be defined as the production, distribution and consumption of utopias. However, if the trajectory of utopian thought teaches us anything it is that a utopia realised is a recipe for disaster. It follows that the implementation of the marketing concept is the very worst thing that can happen to a firm. It is unrealistic; it is impracticable; it is unattainable; it is the kiss of death, a poisoned chalice, a suicide mission, a kind of

Kotler-kazi. Granted, this conclusion may strike many marketing academics as a gross heresy, yet it merely corroborates what numerous commentators are saying about the marketing concept (see Brownlie and Saren 1992; Carson et al. 1995). By all means let us adopt a marketing orientation, but an 'orientation' – in the sense of a general direction or heading – is all it should ever be. As none other than Peter Drucker (1994: 102–3) points out in an analogous conclusion, 'A theory of the business always becomes obsolete when an organisation attains its original objectives. Attaining one's objectives, then, is not cause for celebration; it is cause for new thinking.' It is, as they say, better to travel in hope than to arrive.

In these circumstances, perhaps it is time we stopped berating organisations for adopting the trappings rather than the substance of marketing. Perhaps companies succeed despite not because of marketing. Perhaps marketing is the cause of marketing's current sea of troubles. Perhaps, and this is the most disconcerting possibility of all, the real problem is not that marketing has never been properly implemented, as its apologists proclaim, but that it has been too successful. Mardica has been attained, but it is no paradise. The hidden truth, then, about marketing is that it is not the truth. It is a dream, an escape, a mirage, an illusion, an ideology, a teleological end which when realised proves eschatological. Marketing apocalypse is neither imminent nor immanent; it is immaterial.

NOTES

1 One of the authors (SB) once heard a marketing practitioner describe himself as 'hairy-handed and hairy-arsed'. Presumably, we can conclude that most academics are 'hairy-handed and hairy-arsed'.

2 It should be pointed out that a number of first phase, Morcan-style utopias are set in the future (the protagonist falls asleep and wakes up in a new world), but unlike second phase representations, which tend to be processual and dynamic in ethos, these future societies are essentially static and unchanging. They have already attained perfection.

3 A strong case could also be made for Hollywood movies, glossy magazines, popular music and certain television programmes, though the distinction between these imagined worlds and the ones created by marketing is not clear cut (product placement in films, etc).

4 This three stage periodising schema should not be taken too literally. It seeks to describe the dominant or representative marcadian form during each era, not the only one. As with the utopian literature generally, variations on the 'blessed isle' schema continue to appear, the broadeners are still abroad and dystopian discussions of marketing crises have a very long ancestry. A potentially useful way of conceptualising this seemingly discontinuous continuity is in terms of Raymond Williams' (1980) suggestion that there are always three moments within a particular cultural form – 'dominant', 'emergent' and 'residual' – which change and mutate in keeping with evolving historical or environmental circumstances.

5 Of course, any apocalypses foolish enough to contend that marketing is actually ending and that academic marketers' continuing enthusiasm is merely a dissonant response to failure and defeat, are themselves in danger of having their end of marketing prediction confirmed, with all the ensuing dissonance. It is ending, you know. It is. It is! ITS!! Well, this book is anyway . . .
References


Carson, D.J., Gilmore, A. and Maclaran, P. (1995), "To hell with the customer, where's the profit?", in S. Brown et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the Marketing Ethology Retreat*, University of Ulster, Belfast, pp. 72-81.


Luk, D.J. (1969), "Broadening the concept of marketing - too far", *Journal of Marketing*, 33 (July), pp. 53-5.


What is Marketing?

MARKETING APOCALYPSE

Eschatology, escapology and the illusion of the end

Edited by Stephen Brown, Jim Bell and David Carson

Marc Chagall, Isaiah Prophesying the Apocalypse (1956)
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996

London and New York