Marcadia Postponed: Marketing, Utopia and the Millennium

Before envisioning the future of marketing, as the conference theme suggests, it may be worthwhile examining our desire to envision the future of marketing. This paper argues that our need to imagine the future is part of an innate utopian propensity. It examines the relationship between marketing and utopianism, contends that marketing is inherently utopian in ethos, and concludes that, necessary though they are, future visions of marketing cannot and should not be enacted.

Introduction

According to the theme of this year’s conference, now is the time to envision marketing in the year 2021. Valuable though such an exhortation to imagine or anticipate the future undoubtedly is, it assumes that marketing will still be around 25 years hence. Indeed, it presupposes that the world will still exist in 2021. As a visit to almost any bookshop clearly reveals, however, there is a huge and rapidly growing body of literature which suggests that the world is due to end sometime between now and the early part of the new millennium (e.g. Chandler 1993; Skinner 1994; Lorie 1995). Apart from the familiar prophesies of Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce, both of which alight on the year 2000, Mann’s (1992) detailed inventory of end-time predictions — which range from 5960 B.C. to A.D. 6300 — indicates that the vast majority of these fall into the 1996–2021 time period!

While the proliferation of such predictions can be dismissed as superstitious nonsense or taken as evidence of increasing pre-millennial tension, they also illustrate humankind’s innate propensity to project beginnings and endings upon the passage of time. Just as the end of the world is always imminent, so too a new, improved world is always about to be born (Kermode 1967, 1995; Campion 1994). It is, admittedly, easy to scoff at such metaphysical mysticism, but it is widely considered to be a fundamental correlate of the human condition, one that affects many aspects of our daily lives (Eliade 1989, 1991; Cohn 1993). For example, it is very clearly evident in an academic marketing context, the entire history of which is littered with intermittent declarations of “crisis” and periodic paroxysms of “rediscovery” (Fisk 1971; Bennett and Cooper 1982; Mueller-Heumann 1986; McKenna 1991). The current marketing scene is literally awash with apocalypticists, people who maintain that the end of marketing is nigh (Brownlie et al. 1994; Lynch 1994; Wensley 1995); and millenarians, individuals articulating, advocating and anticipating all manner of alternative perspectives, philosophies, paradoxes and panaceas (Christopher et al. 1991; Firt and Venkatesh 1993; Doyle 1995).

MEG ’96 is a wonderful example of the latter millenarian propensity and, in

Footnotes:

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keeping with the overall conference theme, the present paper attempts to explore this essentially utopian urge to envisage new or alternative futures. The word "utopian", admittedly, carries connotations of impractical, unrealistic, otherworldly dreamers, an accusation that has rarely, if ever, been levelled at marketing practitioners. Nor, for that matter, does the appellation appear applicable to the vast majority of marketing academics, who rightly pride themselves on being in touch with the real world of practising managers. 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 in all its manifestations. This paper, however, will argue that marketing is irredeemably, and in many ways, necessarily, utopian, though this inclination brings costs as well as benefits. The present discussion commences with a potted history of Utopia; continues with a summary of utopian (mis)representations of the marketing system; turns to a description of Marcadita, the utopian world that marketers inhabit; and concludes with a consideration of the lessons which utopianism contains for marketing in these unsettled pre-millennial times.

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 disputatious history. Although the word was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, when he conflated the Greek terms ousutopia (no place) and eutopia (good place), the concept of a perfect world long predates the fictional island described by More’s narrator, Raphael Hythloday. A paradisiacal 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 Homer’s Elysium, Plato’s ideal city, Virgil’s Arcadia or Hesiod’s golden age (Manuel 1971a). Indeed, as Kumar (1991) makes clear, utopian-style milieux are 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 overgeneralization, it can be contended that the utopian inclination is an all-but ubiquitous human propensity (Alexander and Gill 1984; Rooney 1985; Levitas 1990; Neville-Sington and Sington 1993; Levin 1994).

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 voyages 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 Manuel’s magisterial compendium, utopianism flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reached its apex in the nineteenth, and has declined drastically in the twentieth (Manuel and Manuel 1979). Clearly, the sheer number and staggering diversity of textual utopias, coupled with the very fluid boundaries of the genre, renders any attempt at generalization highly problematic. A host of typologies and
classifications have been posited — soft utopias, hard utopias, sensate utopias, spiritual utopias, aristocratic 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 1971b).

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. Welcomed 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, discomforts, 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, shelter, 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, the nineteenth century in particular witnessed the emergence of a second distinctive literary 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, communitarianism 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 everyday life in the envisaged society are conspicuous by their absence. As Marx famously remarked on his contemptuous dismissal of such speculation, "I write no recipes for the cookshops of the future". Second, the societies being portrayed 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 twentieth century. Variously described as dystopias, anti-utopias, counter-utopias, contratopias, kakotopias and sub-topias, these comprise a complete inversion, a sort of grotesque mirror image, of the paradisiacal original (Kumar 1987). Incarnated in celebrated works like Orwell's 1984, Huxley's Brave New World and Zamyatin'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 broadest sense. They offer, in short, "a chilling vision of an alienated and enslaved world" (Kumar 1991, p.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 characterized by a wholesale retreat from utopia (Kumar 1995a). This apparent capitulation is compounded 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 Enlightenment project and the progressivist trajectory of modernity. In complete contrast 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; Cahoone 1996).

Despite its latter-day buffeting and dramatic retreat from the intellectual high ground, the utopian inclination 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 (Ayers 1993; Lebergott 1993; Relf 1993; Levin 1994). Yet, 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 Freidman 1992, p.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 innumerable imitators (Bann 1993).

Utopia Myopia

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 idealized marketing arrangements are few and far between. This reticence, it must be emphasized, is not simply another instance of the marketer's perennial complaint; the fact that everyone ignores, under-rates 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, forestalling, speculation, profiteering, cut-throat competition or whatever — is considered to be inimical to the good life. Marketing, so the argument goes, merely raises expectations, foments 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
Cockaygne, the apocryphal poor man's heaven (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 spittoons and chamberpots. Similarly, the former travelling salesman, Charles Fourier — variously described as “a madman” (Levin 1994, p.26) and the “greatest utopian after More” (Manuel 1971b, p.132) — managed to find inspiration in the apparent iniquities 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 91 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 and advocates unfettered competition in the form of free trade, but it comprises an extended paean 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, sub-standard 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 considered 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”. Indoctrinated 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, Marin 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).
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Depressingly commonplace 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 élite, 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 Cockayne, 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 1996), then it follows that the creation of utopias, or utopian surrogates, is marketing's raison d'etre. With its boundless ability to invent "imaginary 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, p.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 societal 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 postmodern 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 anal epiphany 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 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 is the order of the day, is nothing less than an utopian fantasy that is preposterous, some would say megalomaniac, in its ambition and scope. Call it what you will — Martopia, Paradise, Markeden, Marlenium, Marlysium, Markanadu, Marcanaan — 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"
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(the latter is doubly idealistic since science itself is irreparably utopian); and 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.) 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 behaviourist paradigm, Kotler’s three levels of marketing consciousness or the work of the renowned retailing theorist, Malcolm P. McNair. Maslow was a well-known euphychic, Skinner wrote a best-selling utopia, *Walden Two*, Kotler’s consciousness raising is clearly indebted to the likes of Theilhard 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 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 subdivided 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 completely dominated by North American scholarship, much to the annoyance of certain Europeans (Gummesson 1993; Brown 1997), 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

![Figure 1. Maps of Marcadia (adapted from Brown, 1987, Dibb et al 1994)]
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 blindingly obvious, for example, that the earliest post-war explications of the marketing concept, such as those by Keith (1960) and McKitterick (1957), 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 somewhat 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 (Kotler and Levy 1969; Luck 1969; Kotler 1972). 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 was carefully positioned at a future point in time and only available to those who are prepared to live by the all-important magic words, “the customer is always right”. Of late, moreover, the third, dystopian, “we’re on the road to nowhere” stage of marketing development has come very much to the fore. As a quick perusal of the leading journals clearly demonstrates, disenchantment with the traditional marketing model of analysis, planning, implementation and control is very widespread at present (Percy 1992), the marketing concept is no longer considered universally applicable (Wensley 1990), and the strategic marketing warfare metaphor that held sway in the 1980s is increasingly deemed inappropriate to the environmental circumstances that now prevail (Doyle 1995).

The trajectory of modern marketing thought may parallel the evolution of utopianism, from imagined other, through teleological consummation, to defeatist 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 cornucopian 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 burgeoning relationship marketing paradigm, the ubiquitous textbook representations of which comprise a very distinctive spatial arrangement around the hub of the network, though the latter may be absent or decentralised, as in the oft-cited case of so-called “hollow” corporations. These spatial arrangements, what is more, carry clear paradiasilic connotations since they patently resemble the radiating rays of numinous celestial light that have for centuries signified heaven, saints, angels and spiritual enlightenment in countless artistic representations of the godhead (Figure 2).

Maradise Lost

Although it is easy to dismiss 480 years of post-Morean 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 meaningful lessons from the interpenetration of marketing and utopia. 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 utopian 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 essentially 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 paradiasiacal since they envisage perfect organizations with carefully co-ordinated marketing mixes, minutely detailed marketing plans, totally amicable inter-functional relationships, meticulously executed competitive strategies and absolutely unshakeable customer orientations. 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 1996).

If, in short, the vast majority of today’s utopias are marketing inflected 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 paradise 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, fascistic 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 landing. 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 utopianism does not inhere in the vision itself. On the contrary, dreams of utopia are important and necessary. They offer an arresting vision of future possibilities. 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. But — and this is a very big but — the history of utopianism clearly demonstrates that every attempt to enact, attain or realize 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 1991, 1993, 1995a).

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 realized is a recipe for disaster. It follows, then, 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.

In these circumstances, perhaps it is time we stopped berating organizations 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. Marcadia has been attained, but it is no paradise.

Conclusion

As centuries and millennia draw to a close, thoughts tend to turn to apocalyptic endings and millennial beginnings (Schwartz 1990; Bull 1995; Kumar 1995). This propensity is very clearly marked in marketing at present and, indeed, underpins the theme of the present MEG conference. This paper has argued that prior to envisioning the future of marketing, it is necessary to examine our essentially utopian desire to envisage the future. Although the history of utopian thought is characterized by a hostile view of the marketing system, it contains at least one vitally important lesson. Necessary and inspirational though they are, utopian depictions of the future cannot and should not be enacted. By all means let us envisage marketing in the year 2021, but let us not attempt to realize these dreams. After all, it is better to travel in hope than to arrive.

References


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