Emancipation, Epiphany and Resistance: On the Underimagined and Overdetermined in Critical Marketing

"To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity."

(Freire 1996:29)

The emerging area of 'critical marketing' claims that the value of importing critical social theory lies in its capacity to interrogate the basic assumptions and conventions that guide research and teaching practice and collective institutional development within the marketing discipline. In her reviews of the character and status of critical marketing, Burton (2001, 2005) bemoans the slow development of critical discourse in marketing, attributing it to "[a] lack of a theoretical tradition and relatively poor knowledge of theoretical developments in other social sciences" (2001:737). She broadly asserts that emancipation from the structures and strictures that bind marketing scholars to normalised institutionalised logics, such as performative means-ends calculus and naïve scientism, should be the goal of a critical marketing project that seeks to redress the lack of critical theoretical discourse within the discipline. This paper considers the claimed liberatory potential of critmar, arguing that notions of emancipation are not only situated and utopian in character, but undermined by the politics of representation: this is another way of saying that if we are to realise the reflexive, de-naturalising goals of critmar, we must theorise social contexts of marketing knowledge production. The paper discusses how it might be that self-consciously motivated critical

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2 One of four reviewers was unhappy with the paper's tone and style, accusing it of being patronising and turgid. I offer the rule of the insightful paragraph: in many critical social theory texts studied in researching this paper, there is one point, typically a paragraph, sometimes more, where the style of the author exactly matches the reader's style of understanding. Is one reviewer's plain English another's empty drivel?
3 'critmar' seems to be a convenient abbreviation for 'critical marketing' given space constraints.

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theorising in marketing could make it possible to see and say different things than we are accustomed to; to interrogate our understanding anew, perhaps revealing new insights, or reminding us of past insights now forgotten. In this way the paper explores critmar's aim to open up collective disciplinary space for new voices and new sources of disciplinary capital, encouraging a theoretical pluralism within marketing that draws on the wider social sciences.

Visible Invisibles

"The Holy theatre...is the theatre of the invisible-made-visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognise when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes..."

(Brook 1968:47).

The project of critmar is about ‘seeing things’ and making connections the ‘marketing way’; that is, in a way that is admissible or socially acceptable within the social formation, discourses and practices that constitute the marketing academy (Brownlie 2000). It is about what could be called the ‘marketectures’, or dominant discourses (Vargo and Lusch 2004) that constitute forms of subjectivities or organising visions within our field. It considers how we conjure up these visions through which we render ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by representing it in terms of imagined acts and objects that we decide can stand for something we call ‘real’ acts and objects: ie those that we impute to the lived experience of our informants as we say it represents itself to us through the distance of observation and discussion. Critmar is also about how inscriptions* organise us in such a way as to sustain conventions that are inattentive to embedded value assumptions which guide the conduct of research (Grey and Willmott 2005): that objects in the marketing world ‘out there’ are antecedent to our representations of them; and that our representations can be deployed as a neutral means of apprehending those pre-existing objects.

In seeking to destabilise the silent technologies or practices by means of which we ‘do’ objectivity in marketing, the critmar project aims to make available for inspection, not only the myth of objectivity itself, but related assumptions regarding the neutrality of marketing knowledge making

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4 This term is used here to refer to unspoken, or taken for granted norms and assumptions that guide practice and that to which we are ‘institutionally’ blinded through our disciplinary socialisation.
practice. The paradox of all this is that whilst critmar is indeed said to be
‘about’ those things, this ‘aboutness’ is itself a discursive effect, an
accomplishment of socially situated signifying practices. For in saying that
some thing is ‘about’ some other thing, not only have we already called into
being some act or object, but we have fashioned an image of it from the
repertoire of socially acceptable representational devices available to us. The
relations between those so-called ‘real’ acts and objects and the images we
use in talking or writing ‘about’ them are themselves representations.
Objectification and its corollary objectivity are thus ways of saying
something of some thing, of locating images in relation to other images
within admissible scenes or ‘marketectures’. This is another way of
representing or simulating Garfinkel’s (1967) observation that our accounts
are constituent features of the settings we make observable. We are in the
scenes we depict and this interrogates the assumption that knowledge and
experience are given to us in unmediated forms.

A path to the vibrant disciplinary reflexivity sought by critmar will then
provide ways of thinking ourselves out of a social matrix whereby “experience
comes to us prepackaged” (McLaughlin 1998:203). Thus, the critmar project is
also about how our imaginative works draw on the social material of
collectively sustained symbolic structures which organise our visions and
bind us into sets of rules and orthodoxies that illuminate our imaginary,
while leaving some space to be imaginative with our representations within
admissible conventions (Geertz 1973:450). So, for instance, when we talk or
write about the so-called ‘lived experience’ of managers or consumers, we do
so in the knowledge that our textual constructions are shot through with the
imagery of admissible accounts, or inscriptions that frame what is seeable
and sayable: for as Mingers (2000:230) observes, “the prevailing orthodoxy
becomes embodied in the institutions and procedures and becomes a given
context or boundary within which everything else proceeds”.

What such accounts would then depict is not necessarily how things
literally are among consumers or managers, but of how, from a particular
angle, they imaginatively are; or how, using a particular style of
representation, say through speaking (privileging) the language of logical
empiricism, we can talk or write about them ‘as if’ they are. One of the key
aims of the critmar project is to encourage a more reflexive approach to the
making of truth claims within the discipline and also to widen the repertoire
of strategic rhetorics available to those seeking to interrogate such claims and
to position their counter claims. Lines of argument growing out of a body of
unreflective text have available to them a limited repertoire of positioning
strategies which weakens the validity of the knowledge claims being forged.
In the absence of a more reflective research and writing practice, the
marketing discipline seems doomed to perpetuate a narrow style of
knowledge-making that is increasingly precarious. For instance, in discussing the contribution of the network approach to framing our understanding of market exchange, Hakansson, Harrison and Waluszewski (2004) deploy the term ‘marketing’ as if there is no problem with its meaning. Indeed it is curious that, after almost 25 years of research and speculation, the IMP group still seems unable or unwilling to theorise itself and the ‘object’ of its gaze in a way that does not privilege the gaze of the researcher. For, in waxing lyrical about the value of framing market exchange through the lens of organisational relationships, the authors leave uncontested the relations that mediate or frame their uncontested assertions regarding the penetrative power of the network perspective and the observations it affords - in other words, as Chia remarks, “their own accounts are represented as if they have been somehow able to avoid socially constructing the claims they themselves make” (1996:84). Yet, paradoxically, to legitimate their uncontested assertions, the authors employ a naïve rhetoric that privileges something they know as ‘empirical observation’ as the basis for passing judgement on knowledge claims, reverting to this cliché so often and predictably as to fetishise it.

In under-theorised fields like the discipline of marketing, one contribution that critimar seeks to make is to illuminate how texts strategically deploy discursive conventions so to better occupy the higher-ground, or to naturalise the manner of their claims to authority and authenticity. By expanding our awareness of the repertoire of styles of performing knowledge claims, of communicating and acting in wider policy contexts, critimar seeks to work through the ‘status panic’ that often infects the discipline when held to account in the company of the wider social sciences, where, as Alvesson trenchantly observes, “marketing is used almost as a pejorative term” (1994:291). In the world of the RAE, this is increasingly important as the marketing academy takes serious efforts to jostle for position, status and respect in the highly competitive and under-funded world of higher education. The tendency for one disciplinary area to trash another has to be seen in the context of higher educational politics within the framework of the RAE and marketing has to get over its crisis of confidence (Littler and Tynan 2005).

Dormitive Framings

“[it] is important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs”

(Mill 1996:67).

Having said all that, some of the more ‘entrepreneurially minded’ critical management scholars have not been slow to exploit the rhetoric of textually constructed ‘critical distance’ as a literary device for making strong assertions
about the oppression wreaked by other disciplines upon the world - while claiming innocence for themselves! For instance, in a rather unforgiving and sanctimonious critique of what he calls 'consumer marketing', Alvesson (1994) claims that because this subject area is the dutiful servant of capitalism - cultural doping and mystification being among its more acceptable activities - society needs the intervention of critical theory in order to 'liberate parochial marketing academics' (ibid 1994:302) and the citizens they seek to orchestrate from the tyranny of calculated misrepresentation and narrow-mindedness that constitutes the field. He uses the metaphor of emancipation to evoke a process of transformation towards epiphany, an awakening to the institutionalised blindness embedded in the disciplinary formation of marketing. In this way the goal of emancipation is to help the blind (marketers) to 'see' through revealing the habits of thought and prejudices that guide their vision. In this sense 'sight' is the privilege of perspective: our 'gaze' is administrated by a technical and cultural apparatus and it conforms to the norms of that social setting (Marcuse 1964). It is not merely a matter of claiming to see things as others do not, and of taking the trouble to say so, but of attributing to received disciplinary perspectives differential levels of consciousness. One person's acuity can be another's myopia and the paradox resides in the socially constructed nature of what we do or do not notice. As Thompson (1972:24) writes "In a town full of bedrock crazies, nobody even notices an acid freak". The gaze is socially situated (Brownlie 2000). It can become a penetrating gaze when turned in on itself to reveal ways in which we do not see. Goleman (1985:24) expresses this paradox succinctly in the form of one of R.D.Laing's (1971) "knots":

The range of what we think and do
is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
that we fail to notice
there is little we can do
to change
until we notice,
how failing to notice
shapes our thoughts and deeds.

The term dormitive is used by Goleman (1985: 24) to denote an obfuscation, or a failure to see things. He refers to dormitive frames as the forces that make for a waking sleep at the margins of awareness, or as the bends and twists insinuated into attention by the urge for security and comfort of habit. As Goleman (1985:24) observes "if we can glimpse the edges that frame our experience, we are a bit freer to expand our margins. We may want to have more say over them, to consider whether we want the limits on thought and action so
imposed”. After Firat and Venkatesh (1995), this paper considers the liberatory function of seeing things such as ‘relevance’ differently; of noticing what it is that we fail to notice about ‘relevance’ in marketing, even if it means that the pressures to conform to institutionalised expectations and conventions remain inescapable. As Laing (1971: 1) notices: “They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.”

To think new thoughts, to render the familiar strange, we must first consider what makes the thinkable possible. Giddens (1993:15) observes that “modern institutions are unthinkable without systematic and informed reflection upon the conditions of social activity”. As Brownlie, Saren, Wensley and Whittington (1994) argue, marketing thought then calls for such systematic reflection upon the conditions of social activity within its gaze; and marketing re-thought, through critical perspectives, calls for the discipline to interrogate this normalising gaze and to confront the strangeness of the familiar (Brownlie, Saren, Wensley and Whittington 1999). Critmar can then be seen as an exercise in the surveillance of meaning (Baudrillard 1983 1990), a considered reflexivity which Mills (1959:196) argues is an important component of what he calls ‘intellectual craftsmanship’. In a similar vein Cooper and Burrell (1988:101) observe that “[In order to see the ordinary with a fresh vision, we have to make it ‘extraordinary’, ie., to break with the habits of organized routine and see the world ‘as though for the first time’; it is necessary to free ourselves of normalized ways of thinking which blind us to the strangeness of the familiar”.

The cornerstone of the critmar argument is that collective institutions of marketing instigate regularities of conduct and experience that come to constitute its subjects. The point of importing critical social theory is thus to nurture a sceptical reflexivity which raises questions about entrapment within dominant paradigms and other totalising systems that function as interpretation. The critmar project is clearly about the renewal of what Habermas (1971, 1974) understands as the ‘emancipatory impulse’, the reflexive and sceptical urge, in this case, of marketing. Indeed, this paper is an attempt to get beyond what might be known as the happy, business as usual marketing, beyond what Marcuse (1964:84) refers to as “The Happy Consciousness – the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods – [that] reflects the new conformism which is a facet of technological rationality translated into social behaviour”.

Happy Marketing

‘Facts may seem black and white by the time they hit your TV screen, but professional teams sift through mountains of grey to get them there. You need
After Hopper, Story and Willmott (1987:438) the paper argues that the value of critical perspectives “resides in [their] capacity to reveal some of the basic assumptions and theoretical deficiencies of [conventional] approaches”. Thus, the critmar project is not attempting to draw attention towards ‘new’ marketing phenomena, but to the conditions of possibility of the ‘new’: how we might render different images of what we have already decided is knowable. In this regard critmar argues for a socially and historically located understanding of the discipline and the traditions that link the interpreter and that which is interpreted (cf Arnold and Fisher 1994; Holbrook 1997; Brownlie 2000; Burton 2001, 2002, 2005). And drawing on the richly percipient work of Bristow in Fischer (1994) in the context of setting voices of feminist critique within consumer research, especially situating the presence of the researcher in the research, critmar also seeks to encourage voices that have been marginalised or excluded by disciplinary practices and the institutions which support them (Murray and Ozanne 1991, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). As Grey (1997:593) comments “The History of management studies, like the history of all disciplines, is one in which the contributions of some are recognised while those of others are occluded or marginalized. Although this may have an aspect of chance, more obviously it reflects distinct patterns of inequality. Thus those voices which are generally marginal in society are likely to be written out of any specific history”.

Broadly speaking then, as Morgan observes, critical perspectives position marketing as a way of ‘doing particular social relations’ (1992: 136). In a revision of this paper, Morgan (2003:129) adds that the widespread penetration of marketing into the public sphere has become too important a part of collective social life to be left solely to the naïve technocratic rhetoric and representations of the extant marketing discourse which has given us the hegemonic world of the ‘governable consumer’. He concludes that critical approaches to marketing must “be part of a wider attempt to reconstruct our understanding of the relationship between self and society in a context where global problems of insecurity, risk and inequality cannot be solved on the basis of individual preferences” (2003:130). And in this sense he bemoans the lack of substantive social critique in marketing, especially in Brown’s (1995, 1998)) superficially attractive “screenings” (Slater, 1997:195)of postmodern analysis. Morgan (2003:119) argues that “the result [of postmodern marketing] is critique that ultimately lacks any purpose beyond its own local struggle to broaden the discipline of marketing. Any critique of ‘society’ or the social consequences of markets, marketing and mass consumption is lost...the result is critique without substance that is all about style and very little about content”.

(Pierre 2003:34)
Operation Margarine

“To instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it.”

(Barthes 1973:45)

In his essay on the impotence of much contemporary criticism of dominant institutions, Barthes (1973:46) warns of the homeopathic effect of criticism that in effect quells, or disables doubts about institutions through exposing their ills. He writes that through what he calls ‘operation margarine’ “one inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one...a little confessed evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil” (ibid: 46). The public exposure of the problems of institutions is then a price worth paying if it immunises the community against deeper social ills, ensuring stasis and conformity. Barthes argues that in this way the survival of the dominant order is ensured; and thus can criticism become the complicit bedfellow of conformity. Indeed, in his critique of the critique of postmodern marketing, Morgan (2003) seems to presage the argument that when style itself becomes content, critique is the bedfellow of conformity.

The critmar project is ‘in theory’ not merely an attempt to bring the problems of the marketing discipline and its institutions to the public gaze through publication, although you could argue that careers may benefit from doing so (Wernick 1991). It is also an attempt to resist or disrupt the conventions that govern practices of interpretation and representation, through engaging in what Alvesson and Willmott (1996: 15) refer to as ‘reconstruction and critique’: where reconstruction “mobilizes critical reason to diagnose prevailing conditions” (ibid, 15); and “critique ‘entails a process of self-reflection...designed to achieve liberation from the domination of past constraints’” (Connerton 1976:20 in Alvesson and Willmott, ibid). In this sense critmar offers ways of ‘raising questions about dominant paradigms and resisting the totalising systems that function as interpretation’(McLaughlin 1998).

Unpacking Performativity

“If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale.....we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, ‘ that fugitive from the camp of conquerors’.

(Weil 1963:151)

In urging a critical stance towards managerialist assumptions embedded within some areas of marketing thinking, critmar seeks to problematise the status of performative marketing knowledge that makes claims about means,
ends and calculability. The contribution of critical perspectives to management-related disciplines is perhaps most clearly developed within accounting (Power and Laughlin 1992). In their lucid critique of research in management accounting, Hopper, Storey and Willmott (1987) discuss the ‘failure to theorise accounting as a fully social practice’, drawing attention to its narrow base in social science methodology. They question a number of features of mainstream management accounting research, prominent among them being: its theoretical and methodological base in neo-classical economics and functionalist organisational theory; the widely held image of the organisation as a unitary and integrated system where resource allocation decisions are a matter of information provision; the conventional representation of management accounting as a politically neutral, technical information service that can be abstracted from fundamental issues of ownership and control; and the widespread acceptance of the authority of managerialist assumptions. They go on to isolate a number of important problems in the discipline, including: the failure to develop the idea that accounting is a set of practices which are both the medium and outcome of the politico-economic context in which accounting is embedded; the failure to consider the role of language in shaping accounting theory and practice; the failure to analyse the historical and cultural specificity of accounting practices and knowledge; and the growing evidence that “conventional accounting knowledge is often not used in practice; and that when it is, it can induce undesirable and unsought consequences” (op cit:438).

Hopper, Storey and Willmott (1987) not only reveal the potential of critical thinking to contribute to the development of research and theory within management accounting: for their pathfinding work also suggests the potential of critical thinking to contribute to the development of several disciplines which share the basic assumptions of management accounting, including marketing. It is clear then, that as Sawchuck (1994:95) comments, “[marketing] is a fecund terrain for critical thinking”; and that as Alvesson and Willmott (1996:128) advise “a critical theory approach to marketing can bring fresh insights and provide a more penetrating appreciation of its ethical and social significance”.

Importantly, Bartels (1976) and later Cochoy (1998), remind us that marketing has its origins as a discipline in studies of the impact of the monopsonistic buying power of intermediaries on the operations of agricultural markets of the mid-western states of the USA during the late 19th century. Indeed at the turn of that century the “marketing problem”, as it was then known, referred to the “suspected manipulation of prices for farm products by middlemen to the detriment of producers and consumers alike” (Benton 1987: 422). The discipline of marketing emerged from studies of what steps could be taken to provide a civic framework within which markets would operate more effectively in the interest of producers and consumers too. And in this
sense the early development of the discipline could be seen as contributing to the social good of society through exposing what Alvesson and Willmott (1996:120) refer to as "how structures of domination and exploitation shape and mediate [exchange] relationships".

Through revisiting the emancipatory impulse of early marketing, critical perspectives also hope to remind us of the discipline's wider constituency of the managed, consumers and citizens alike, as well as the value of thinking historically (Jameson 1991) about marketing thought (Fullerton 1988; Vink 1992; Hollander and Rassuli 1993). There may be an imbalance in marketing scholarship which critical perspectives could help redress, for it does seem as if today's happy marketing discipline has lost its early direct involvement in the wider affairs of the community. The challenge posed by critmar is to be able to engage with more than one perspective, perhaps through dialectical tacking (Geertz 1983; Thompson 1997); to have a repertoire of more than one way of performing your knowledge; to recognise when the undecidable is being rendered decidable and for what purposes; and to privilege ideas knowingly.

Relevant Relevance

"People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public"

(Smith, 1776:177)

There is a peculiar paradox in marketing when it comes to confronting the ways in which our unexamined disciplinary commitments and institutionalised visions blind us to the ways we do not see. This is especially so in recurring debates around the construct 'relevance'. Several authors have provided compelling accounts of this as a feature of institutional practices and forms of governance, the conditions of possibility of which are embedded in the complex network of hierarchy, policies and rhetorical devices facilitating desired social outcomes, by means of which to manage consensus and build discipline in the image of the collegiate (Brownlie and Saren 1997; Burton 2001; Catterall, McLaren and Stevens 1999, 2002).

From time to time the community of marketing scholars revisits and energises its long standing interest in the meaning of 'relevance' in research and what should be done to support the production of 'relevant' marketing knowledge (Alderson 1957; Kover 1976; Greyser 1978; Charnes et al. 1985; Lilien et al. 2002; Rossiter 2001; Cornelissen 2002; Cornelissen and Lock 2005). As Adam Smith's observation suggests, this is done in the interests of the marketing academy, even if it is draped in the rhetoric of 'getting closer to the needs of managerial constituencies', 'bridging the academic-practitioner divide' (Lilien et al. 2002), 'joining a conversation' (Perry et al.
Emancipation, Epiphany and Resistance 515

2003), or otherwise engineering meaningful interaction and mutual understanding. In recent years there has been a flurry of interest in such topics as conditions for winning reputation-enhancing public research funding strategically deploy legitimising discourses of 'relevance', 'accountability', 'impacts', 'outcomes', 'evidence-based frameworks', 'user needs', 'targets', 'beneficiaries' etc. And there is evidence that, while this is happening, the fragile disciplinary consensus on relevance as 'managerial usefulness' is disintegrating as the complexity of the issue escapes naïve calculation, revealing a far from straightforward connection between power relations that sustain knowledge production and those which drive knowledge use.

In pursuing the liberatory impulse of critical perspectives, critmar, seeks to widen our repertoire of available positions on 'relevance', coming at it from the idea of marketing as an institutional field with its own hierarchies, elites and social technologies of control that work through the practice of authority figures, including experts, examiners, editors, specialists, reviewers, funders, office-bearers and publishers. They function to normalise marketing knowledge through conferring approval on theoretical framings and lines of inquiry, deciding upon appropriate methods of inquiry and the admissibility of data. Those practices not only play an important role in the constitution of the research subject - the consumer, the manager or even the marketing academic - they exert a disciplining effect on the subjectivities of the researchers.

The institutional formation of marketing can then be understood as a shifting network of social relations and situated positions which generate regulated practices. This regulation extracts compliance from members of the marketing academy through defining legitimate 'technologies of the self', including permissible modes of self-censorship, self-presentation and self-promotion. This leads to the contention that the typical instrument for framing issues surrounding relevance - ie. the popular metaphor of the gap, the divide, or sometimes even the widening gap, or widening divide between marketing theory and practice (typically in that order) - is a necessary and inevitable rhetorical device for naturalising the regulation of marketing research; and for being seen to do so in the interests of fulfilling wider institutional expectations of a professionalising discipline capable of self-administered governance and accountability. And the author argues that it is in regard to the character of the relationship between institutional bodies representing marketing practice and the academy that the discipline of marketing has the potential to bring something unique to the area of critical management studies.

The paper seeks to illustrate the relevance of critmar through considering how it might help denaturalise the reified notion of 'relevance', rescuing it
from the easy imperatives of common sense discussion which readily asserts
that published research in marketing somehow lacks something called
‘managerial use-value’ (Greyser 1978; Anderson 1983; Charnes et al. 1985).
Indeed, in some senses the popular and perennial requirement for a
‘managerial implications’ passage in much published marketing research can
be construed as an institutional check on the ‘(ir)relevance’ of published
research, since as Brinberg and Hirschman (1986:161) note “Marketing
traditionally has been a discipline in which the pragmatic contribution of an
investigation is the primary basis on which its worth is calculated.” Yet despite
such institutionalised protocols, authors argue that scholarly research in
marketing can still be judged by managers and other users, including our
peers, to be irrelevant (Piercy 2000; Varadarajan 2003). However, a critmar
take on the issue would consider how the abstract idea of ‘relevance’ could
have acquired its apparently factual character and its widely held fascination
within the collective mindset of the marketing academy (Saren, 2000). How
could it be that the idea of ‘relevance’ has achieved the ontological status
whereby it is taken for granted as an actor or active condition in the
marketing world? In unpacking the reification of ‘relevance’, i.e.
denaturalising it as an innocent legitimising force, critmar would argue that
as long as it continues to be framed in this way, the facticity of ‘relevance’
remains taken for granted and thus self-evidently obvious, while its
substantiating discourses are conveniently bracketed-off behind a veil of so-
called ‘common-sense’.

Premeditated Protest

But why bother with such navel gazing, fit only for the journal of obscurity?
After thirty years of disquisition on the benefits of a market orientation and
such like, has the tide not turned marketing’s way? Have the perennial
battles for recognition and legitimacy not been won? And with our finely
honied rhetoric are we not now pressing against open doors? Has not
marketing, as a discipline, a practice and an ideology, come of age? Its star is
in the ascendancy and its ambitions are sweeping and heroic. Indeed, the last
20 years has seen the coming of age of marketing. Its ideas and rhetoric are
commonly used to legitimise change in organisations of all hues and sizes.
Markets are offered globally as the solution to the challenges of whole
societies. Consumption has become a central organising principle in
contemporary societies in an era when “all ideologies have been defeated: in the
end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them
seriously “(Kundera 1991:127). Indeed, some of us will the remember the late
1970s and the early days of the punk rock movement, especially the Sex
Pistols, who made an art form out of promoting ideological claims of
resistance against exploitative ideology which were all firmly based on
advancing commercial interests.

In this light it might seem that critmar’s declared concerns for imbalance and premature closure might sound rather measured and well-rehearsed, especially if you feel that marketing is an eclectic and progressive scientific subject: that its institutions facilitate a self-conscious critical approach; that those institutions help promote a wider recognition for the expertise that marketing contributes to society; that marketing is a creative subject which is already capable of regenerating itself; and that all this is evidenced by the application of marketing technology to an ever-widening range of organisational, social and political contexts. You might then wonder why we should bother thinking about critical marketing anyway when there is so much business as usual to be done, even if we could do with opening up new disciplinary space.

Brownlie, Saren Wensley and Whittington (1998) argue that business as usual is not enough and that marketing’s underlying framework of theory and concepts would benefit from critical perspectives. This is a line of thought of some standing within the discipline (cf: Anderson 1983; Arndt 1980 1985; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Brownlie, Saren, Wensley and Whittington 1993; Deshpande 1983; Dholakia and Arndt 1985; Dholakia, Firat and Bagozzi 1987; Firat 1992; Dholakia, Firat and Bagozzi 1987; Murray and Ozanne 1991 1995; Hetrick and Lazada 1994). It has been continued most recently by Burton (2001 2005) who argues that the development of the discipline as a social science is being stifled by the tendency to take narrowly fixed positions of agreement about the character of marketing knowledge and its theorisation. Drawing inspiration from Giddens (1993), the paper understands that marketing theory is not just a way to frame meaning, it also ‘constitutes a moral intervention in the social life whose conditions of existence the theory seeks to clarify’ . In this sense Burton (2005) argues that what passes for marketing theory requires vigilant interrogation through the critical engagement of dialogic critique. Giddens sees this as ‘the very life blood of fruitful conceptual development in social theory’ (1993:1), while Alvesson and Willmott (1996:119) see it as contributing to the “challenging and removal of discourses and practices that are incompatible with the development of greater autonomy and responsibility”.

Reel to Real Nostalgia

“Strange how things in the offing, once they’re sensed, convert to things foreknown; and how what’s come upon is manifest, only in the light of what has been gone through”


Kundera (1991:128) discusses how reality was once stronger than ideology;
how the imagology of those who now shape public opinion has gained a historic victory over ideology; and how the power of imagology, of the circulation of representations, has now surpassed reality, which for many has ceased to be what they say it once was. You could say that we live in an age driven by the politics of the signifier where things can be made to mean differently; when ideas of emancipation and liberation are seen as no more than the necessary utopian fantasies of social marketers and other moral activists; when reality is merely a support for the packaging; when signs of the real replace the real; when what people buy is not simply objects, but the sign-system of objects that imbue these functional objects with both status and signification; when the chicken we buy is not “real” or “natural”, but “a culturally manipulated foodstuff...an extension of the producer’s [or retailer’s] marketing strategy” (Sawchuck 1994:104). As she remarks:

“marketing history has developed the following discourse on its own practice: marketing records ostensibly inherent desires, then creates new products (or repackages old ones) that ostensibly satisfy these desires. In doing so there is a shift in the level of abstraction. One does not sell a specific product, such as a tampon, one sells “sanitary protection”, of which a tampon is one profitable solution”.

(Sawchuck 1994:100)

Thus do powerful marketing discourses construct particular views of society and markets, organisations, consumers and consumption objects within it (Brownlie and Saren 1997). As Morgan (1992: 137) observes, marketing can be understood as “a set of practices and discourses which help to constitute and shape social relations in modern Western societies”. Marketing discourse is then a central part of a process whereby “a particular form of society is constructed, one in which human beings are treated as things” (Morgan 1992:154). The marketing gaze constructs consumers as governable objects, as rational, sovereign, self-actualising actors whose identity is reduced to the ‘ownership of commodities and all social relations are conceived in market terms’. Framed in this way, consumers are seeking ‘to maximise the worth of their existence to themselves through personalised acts of choice in a world of goods and services’ (du Gay and Salaman 1992:623). The social and cultural properties of material things then provide one of the key axes of signification in contemporary societies and marketing can be located within processes through which individual identity is constructed.

Marketing can indeed be understood as the engine of a vast post-panoptic system of observation and social control by means of which it tracks, traces and seduces unknowing consumers into participation in its processes (Alvesson and Willmott 1996: 124; Packard 1960). Many of the declared woes of contemporary consumer society can, if you choose, be laid at its door as
the conspiring footman of a voracious neo-capitalism (Frank and Weiland 1997). In the estimation of Alvesson and Willmott (1996: 125) these woes would include pollution, crime, social division and exclusion, as well as the emptiness and ennui of pampered consumers who, without the careful percipience of those authors and others like them, would be incapable of realising that they are caught in a ‘narrow and distorted process of communication and self-formation’ (ibid); and that this ‘inhibits opportunities for autonomy, clarification of genuine needs and wants, and thus greater and lasting satisfaction” (Alvesson and Willmott 1992:435).

My Favourite Heresies

“In an ordinary crime, how does one defend the accused? One calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is ipso facto, on its face and by its nature, an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore, who may possibly be witness to it? The witch and the victim. None other. Now we cannot hope the witch will accuse herself; granted? Therefore, we must rely upon her victims – and they do testify, the children certainly do testify. As for the witches, none will deny that we are most eager for all their confessions. Therefore, what is left for a lawyer to bring out”

(Miller 1953:80)

The aim of critmar is not merely to articulate criticism, but to explore the potential liberatory aspects of the tensions between current marketing thinking and criticisms of it (Bristow and Fischer 1994; Firat and Venkatesh 1995, Connolly and Frothero 2003; Fitchett and McDonagh 2000; Scott 2005). Furthermore, it is not merely to reproduce the “strong version” of Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992:453) critical theory, with its totalising attack on management ideology and promises of emancipation from false consciousness and ‘frozen social relations’. Following Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992:453) revealing attempt to reformulate the idea of emancipation in management and organisation studies, this paper suggests a more modest form of engagement with the discipline and its representations of the everyday practices of consumers or managers and the institutions that produce and mediate those practices. It favours an eclectic framework of critique which leaves space for many voices other than those of card-carrying critical theorists. There is indeed much to be learned from letting consumers or managers speak for themselves, even if critical ethnographers have difficulty ‘hearing’ what is being said, for there is much to commend Lilley’s (1997:51) view that “managers and critical management researchers may be playing similar games, with similar rules, for different teams.” The danger is that critical theorists in their well-rehearsed rhetoric and pre-meditated posturing would be unable to recognise emancipation anywhere but in their officially-
sanctioned showplaces; that they would be blind to the possibility that the ardent claims of critical management academics and other wide-eyed, well scrubbed children of the suburbs, are more a symbol of the contemporary culture machine’s authority, than an agent of resistance (Frank 1997:154); that critical management and its local variant, critmar, would be silent in the face of its own unspoken claims to authority and privilege.

A critical marketing would then reassert the part to be played by active consumers and managers. It would of course seek to problematise the assumption that marketing managers and consumers act as the carriers of an impartial marketised rationality. It would show how marketing technology cannot provide a neutral way of looking at the world, irrespective of the intentions behind its deployment. It would show how the perennial debates about ‘relevance’ serve the wider political interests of the academy. It would raise awareness of how marketing discourse constitutes its object of analysis, consumers and managers, and is implicated in the production and reproduction of the existing social arrangements which constitute its domain of research. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992:4) suggest, it would also be motivated by “an effort to discredit, and ideally eliminate, forms of management and organization that have institutionalised the opposition between the purposefulness of individuals and the seeming givenness and narrow instrumentality of work-process relationships”, where, after Baudrillard (1975), we can consider markets as work organisations, consumption as a form of work, and consumers as an occupational group. Morgan advises (1992:154) it would develop a ‘critique of existing social arrangements as much as a critique of marketing itself’. And it would seek to do so through developing a critique of the existing social arrangements that constitute the privilege and authority of critical perspectives. Rather than seeing ‘emancipation’ as a final end in itself, it would see it as an ongoing process, a state of mind that needs to be nurtured and sustained: for one person’s emancipation is surely another’s imprisonment, just as “one persons totalising ideology is another’s free-thinking” (Eagleton 1991:4); just as one person’s convoluted dressage is another’s straight talking; just as one person’s alternative music is another’s derivative product of the rebel ideology that fuels music industry marketing; just as the protestation of one person’s counter-culture is another’s repackaged ritual stomping; just as one person’s worthless daub is another venerated treasure; just as one person’s reading of history is another’s false consciousness; just as one person’s attempt at levity is another’s murderous insult. It would carefully consider the possibility of critique and how any critique could possibly be framed (Bauman 1994; Parker 1995; Grey 1997) given a context in which the primary business of business is no longer producing goods or services, or exploiting labour, but manufacturing culture (Frank 1997:157).
What Price Critical Commodification?

We live in an era when it is no longer possible to critique marketing simply on the basis of representation as it is traditionally conceived, i.e. according to the truth claims of the image in relation to some external referent. In the era of imagology, there is no sovereign ‘real’ against which to measure the model, or the copy, the fake, the representation. And although some may take it upon themselves to be the guardians of the ‘real’, critmar’s emancipation of marketing cannot be based solely on the declared idea of an absolute reality against which to judge the false consciousness of others.

This paper shares with Brownlie, Saren, Wensley and Whittington (1999) their sense of the coming importance of a more modestly reflexive discipline (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Law 1994: 9) which is more knowing of its knowledge-making practice and sceptical towards associated truth claims, expressing doubt about normalising precepts which are taken for granted: doubt that marketing knowledge must always have a useful outcome for managers; that marketing theory and practice can be developed without being sensitive to the social, historical and political context; that the problems of developing the profession can be understood without reference to the wider institutional framework within which knowledge is constructed and knowledge claims legitimised; that marketing technologies can be utilised through processes involving the scientifically rational, calculable and efficient application of knowledge; that its technologies of governance are politically neutral; that logical positivism should continue to inform so much empirical work undertaken in marketing; that it is an applied discipline focusing on measurement and objectivity; that by continuing to hone the toolkit of sophisticated marketing technology, we widen the range of problems to which it can be applied; that nihilism is the inevitable consequence of relativism in marketing thought; that there is tolerance of methodological pluralism in the development and dissemination of marketing knowledge; that methodological pathology provides the only basis of critique in marketing; and doubt that marketing discourse can articulate its own conditions of possibility.

Conclusion

A critical marketing is not an attempt to provoke unfettered sniping and declamation, nor is it a home for those with a grudge and an axe to grind. Although it shares a sense of wonder at the accelerating momentum of our discipline, it also seeks to give voice to an increasingly held feeling that something important is happening which embraces yet transcends marketing: reshaping its conditions of possibility, dissolving its ideology into the onward rush of the everyday (Berman 1983: 91). You could argue that
marketing, as a way of doing social relations, has escaped the gravitational pull of the academy and is itself already in global circulation as a cultural commodity and sign-vehicle (Sawchuck 1994: 111), despite the foundational view of knowledge widely promoted in the academy. Perhaps these developments are outlining a defining moment in the evolution of marketing discourse. Or perhaps we are just witnessing the double hermeneutic at play, one consequence of which is, as Giddens (1993:15) suggests, “that original ideas and findings in social science tend to ‘disappear’ to the degree to which they are incorporated within the familiar components of practical activities”. And as Knights (1992: 514) trenchantly observes “once knowledge of the social world enters the public domain, the human conditions which rendered it possible are changed, thus undermining the original validity of such knowledge”.

We labour within a culture that was not always sympathetic to the marketing discipline and have evolved a repertoire of rhetorical devices that, in anticipating resistance to our edicts, has made space for their realisation. Yet, within a few years marketing practice has been taken to heart, enterprise culture pressing them into service towards the ‘marketisation’ of many walks of life. Critmar is not concerned that this rhetoric might be punctured, but that its popularity highlights a paradoxical failure, for marketing remains firmly wedded to an ‘ideological method’. Through placing singular emphasis on the use of ‘facts’ to govern the derivation of theory, in the belief that facts mirror ‘reality’, this method can only provide inadequate accounts of the pre-understandings (Gadamer 1989) that make it possible to identify an issue, let alone pass judgement upon it. In doing so this method is silent on how social relations are historically and culturally conditioned. It also disregards how research methodology and instrumentation are involved in producing and sustaining a particular construction of reality. Our understanding of the principles around which society organises itself are changing. This offers critmar the chance to contribute to a more reflexive understanding of marketing as a discipline and to seek to (re)forge interdisciplinary links with areas of contemporary social theorising, even if, as Knights and Willmott (1997:10) declare, “the culture and career ladders of academia endorse a defensive kind of disciplinary closure that inhibits critical self-reflection”. That the norms of marketing scholarship cannot be divorced from techniques of normalisation which structure thought and discourse into mutually exclusive categories is not in doubt. And although we may share a common identity as members of the marketing tribe, we do not need to believe in the same myths about its past and present; and future past and future present.
References


About the Author

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