Interpreting Monieson: Creative and Destructive Tensions

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Monieson’s article focuses on an important problem that confronts all knowledge systems, including that of macromarketing. This is the problem of intellectualization, whereby knowledge processes become increasingly technical and lose their essence. In this commentary on Monieson, a stylized interpretation is offered of Monieson’s intellectualization in terms of three tensions—between science and conscience, between rigor and relevance, and between opulence and authenticity.

David Monieson’s (1988) article beams an intense searchlight into the knowledge systems of social sciences to illuminate the tensions that permeate these systems. The article is specially significant to the formative and impressionable knowledge system of macromarketing, where paradigms, research philosophies, and methodologies are still flexible and open. It is to be hoped that the article will also shake up and loosen even the more established and moribund knowledge structures of micromarketing.

In this commentary on Monieson’s contribution—one which we expect will achieve landmark status—a stylized interpretation is offered of the various problems Monieson uncovers in the knowledge system of our field. He employs the Weberian term intellectualization rather broadly to characterize tendencies in the knowledge system that result in a loss of meaning. This loss, it is argued here, occurs when a knowledge system slides uncritically into one extreme of the polar tensions bearing on the system.

Three fundamental tensions characterize the knowledge systems of most fields, macromarketing included. These are the tensions between (1) science and conscience, (2) rigor and relevance, and (3) opulence and authenticity. These are axial tensions which, if in a state of taut balance, keep knowledge systems productive, honest, and meaningful. Often enough, however, one or more of these axes snaps and the knowledge system acquires an extreme character. Intellectualization occurs when the knowledge system adopts unquestioningly the values of positive science, methodological rigor, and opulent conceptual schemata.

SCIENCE VERSUS CONSCIENCE

The tension between science and conscience arises in all those fields of inquiry where the goals of knowledge generation and the application of the knowledge appear inconsistent, at least to one segment of the community of researchers. This occurs most vividly in defense-related physical science research. Research in nuclear science to make deadly nuclear weapons may be abhorrent to some scientists. Star wars research funding may enable a scientist to probe cutting-edge phenomena in opto-electronics. But the idea of escalating the superpower weapons race into space may be morally unacceptable.

The conflict arises because the goal of science—knowledge generation because of the intrinsic challenge of the research process—appears unachievable without consenting a priori to morally troubling applications of such knowledge. Similar tensions exist in medical and biological research and, to some degree, in business and marketing research.

Implicit in Monieson’s opening discussion of the characterization of marketing as the process of “the creation and delivery of a standard of living” is the conflict between the science and...
the conscience of macromarketing. If the scientific goal of macromarketing is to understand how marketing systems work and what effect they have, the pursuit of this research goal in the 1950s and 1960s required an endorsement of the imperial mission of marketing. If one did not believe that the business of marketing was to create and deliver boundless prosperity, one had no business being in marketing. What Monieson demonstrates, in fact, is a complete reification of the “conscience” or moral dimension. What happened to marketing in this period is analogous to atomic physics in the 1940s. The reified supreme mission—winning World War II or making U.S. business prosperous—overruled any minor moral discomforts with matters such as human suffering and distributive inequities. Similarly, Monieson’s discussion of social marketing shows how the intellectual excitement with the technique of marketing overruled any concerns about the debasement of institutions to which social marketing techniques were applied.

The axial tension between science and conscience collapses when technique (Ellul 1964) reigns supreme and the knowledge system turns missionary in character and imperial in scope. Moorman (1987) has drawn similar and more elaborate implications of “marketing as technique.” Science overpowers conscience, and a tension which was creative turns destructive.

RIGOR VERSUS RELEVANCE

The tension between rigor and relevance characterizes all systems of knowledge. Ideally, knowledge should be both rigorously derived and relevant to the purposes for which it was created. But this is not the way knowledge systems work. The search for relevance drags a knowledge system into the messy reaches of realism (Hooker 1987). Realism is not untrue or unscientific, but it is messy, evolutionary, sometimes contradictory, and usually undisciplined. In this sense both realism and its advocacy in the form of relevance detract from the pursuit of systematic and disciplined programs of knowledge generation.

The escape from the chaotic realm of relevance is provided by insistence on discipline and rigor in knowledge processes. For science in general, Popper’s Logik der Forschung, published in Vienna in 1935 and translated as The Logic of Scientific Discovery (Popper 1959), laid down the precise, unequivocal principles of falsifiability and corroboration of scientific statements.

For social science, economics in particular, the pendulum was decisively swung to the rigorous extreme by Milton Friedman’s powerful essay, “The Methodology of Positive Economics” (Friedman 1953). It quelled the quibbling about the “undue emphasis on the descriptive realism of . . . assumptions” in economics (p. 42). The a priori seekers of relevance were silenced or driven underground, and the energies of all respectable economists were channeled to the creation and testing of abstract models which could be logically refuted or corroborated.

In marketing, the swing to the rigorous extreme was late in coming—but it did come with Hunt’s powerful advocacy of a positive empiricist framework as the only legitimate one for generating marketing knowledge (Hunt 1983a,b).

Monieson provides an interesting and a very plausible explanation of the social process which makes the pendulum swing to the rigorous pole. With respect to macromarketing, Monieson notes: “The intellectualization of macromarketing is inevitable because in order to be academically respectable macromarketing must be defined as an area of study that is rational and calculable and that accommodates itself to scientific investigation.”

The quest for respectability, for academic standing, for recognition as having a scientific approach—these are the motivations which propel a field to the extremes of methodological and positivist rigor. Like scum and riffraff in a well-manicured suburban neighborhood, critical, subjective, or unrigorous intellectual activity must be banished or pushed underground. Respectability must be defended from dangerous and unsightly encroachments of disidence and subjectivity.

Monieson’s contribution lies in pointing to the disenchantment that results from the triumph of the clean, objective, technical, and self-assuredly progressive forms of knowledge activity. That something gets lost when technical rigor, positively advocated, is neither evident nor of concern to a positivist who is impatient to usher in the gains such rigor will bring (Blum 1974).
The pendulum swing from relevance to rigor in marketing may be much shorter lasting than believed. For one thing, pragmatic concerns, albeit they are largely the concerns of business managers, keep pulling marketing toward the relevance pole. For another, marketing is far less disciplined and much more eclectic than economics. The messiahs of marketing are less messianic than those of economics. Already the swing to the relevance side has begun and is evident in macromarketing, marketing theory, and consumer behavior research (see, for example, Belk 1987). The tension between rigor and relevance has a fair chance of returning to a state of balance (Dholakia 1985).

OPULENCE VERSUS AUTHENTICITY

Monieson indicates that the road to rigorous intellectualization soon turns into a boulevard of opulent conceptual structures. As lawlike generalizations are piled neatly one on top of another to create beautiful conceptual structures rising to the spires of fundamental explananda, we get opulent mansions of micromarketing and macromarketing theories, glittering with the varnish of scientific rigor.

The process of conceptual aggrandizing, which Monieson terms the dawning of the “golden age,” is shown by him to be well under way in micromarketing. Monieson then comments on the incipient but inexorable march of macromarketing to the realm of theoretical grandeur and opulence. And, in his characteristic style, he focuses not on the treasures that lie before us but on the essence of human concerns that we cast aside in our race for epistemic opulence and elegance.

Like the apocryphal country boy or country girl of a 1950s Hollywood movie, we in macromarketing may be temporarily swept off by the dazzle and glamor of city lights, but we have to come to terms with the authentic and root concerns of the field. Monieson provides an agenda for authentication of the research we do: Does it promote social amelioration, social responsibility, and distributive justice? His agenda may be contestable, but the important thing is to keep the debate alive. Since the march to conceptual opulence in macromarketing has just begun, Monieson’s call to authentication may restrain us from straying too far down this golden path.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The process of intellectualization in macromarketing described by Monieson seems to be a thrust in several directions: away from conscience and toward science, away from relevance and toward rigor, away from authenticity and toward opulence. Continuing with Monieson’s Weberian metaphor, if we call the knowledge system suffused with conscience, relevance, and authenticity the “enchanted circle,” then the process of intellectualization is the disintegration of this enchanted circle by the centrifugal pulls toward science, rigor, and opulence (see Figure 1). There are powerful, and valid, forces at work here: the drive to be objective (for science), the drive to measure (for rigor), and the drive to elaborate (for opulence). Monieson is right in concluding that the process of intellectualization is, in many ways, inexorable.

The situation is not hopeless, however, if we recognize that centripetal forces do exist that may restore some balance. These are the rights of scholars to pursue knowledge activities that are oriented toward the enchanted circle. The right to dissent enables a scholar to commit acts of conscience. The right to understand can counteract the blind drive to rigor and refocus scholarly energies on relevance. The right to be simple can check the race to opulence and can promote earthy and authentic knowledge activities.

But like all rights, these are neither automatic nor self-sustaining. The process of intellectualization is one of erosion and even denial of these rights. Slender and frail as they may be, these precious rights are our only means to check the powerful drives of intellectualization that will render our world disenchanted. The way to grasp these rights is to fight the prejudices against conscientious, relevant, and authentic knowledge. With the help of Monieson’s article, perhaps we shall overcome some of those prejudices.
FIGURE 1
THE TENSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH INTELLECTUALIZATION

SCIENCE

The Drive to be Objective

CONSCIENCE
The Enchanted Circle

The Right to Dissent

RELEVANCE

The Drive to Measure

The Right to Understand

AUTHENTICITY

The Right to be Simple

RIGOR

The Drive to Elaborate

OPulence

REFERENCES


