



Marketing ideology and criticism: Legitimacy and legitimization

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Abstract. *The analysis of the dialectical relationships between marketing ideology and criticism is supported by the distinction between legitimacy and legitimization. Marketing ideology is defined as a relatively stable set of arguments that provide legitimacy to marketers and the market economy. However it does not preclude contradictions and the dissenting voice of criticism. Marketing doctrine also produces legitimization to lessen the tensions between the marketer's claim to legitimacy and other people's belief in this legitimacy. As marketing doctrine develops through incorporation of criticism, it follows that the critical process is a never-ending one.*

Key Words ● criticism ● legitimacy ● legitimization ● marketing ideology

The construction and development of markets is an accomplishment that depends on the mobilization of different bodies of expertise, including marketing, and the mobilization of numerous actors, including marketers. Marketing ideology is the relatively stable set of arguments accounting for the marketer's commitment to marketing (management). Its primary function is to help marketers to maintain their ability to meet the demands of their occupation, while the function of criticism is to underline the tensions to which people in the marketers' role are subjected. But as criticism is either ignored, or heard and coopted, it has constantly to be renewed. Therefore, there is a dialectical relationship between marketing ideology and criticism. This article defines each of these concepts, then analyses their functions, contents and relationships.

What is ideology?

In the absence of a firmly established definition, we have first to elaborate on this term. Definitions appear to be torn between two conceptions: one that empha-



sizes its distortion dimensions and another which views it in a broader and more positive light.

Marxist tradition has nurtured strongly the first perspective: ideology means a set of illusory beliefs and a 'false consciousness' by which the ruling class maintains its dominance over the working class. Because the former controls the main means by which ideology is propagated throughout society (i.e. educational, political, legal systems and the mass media), it can then make the latter see its subordination as 'natural' and therefore right. For instance, following the Frankfurt School, Ewen (1988) strives to show how marketing has manipulated consumer culture, using advertising to sell people products and change their lifestyles.

The problem with this conception is the following: who are those who know the truth about the social reality and can contrast ideology with true or scientific knowledge? People only know reality through their representations. If we accept that individual and group behaviours are not only determined by the objective characteristics of a situation but also by interpretation and representation of that situation, and if we accept, too, that collective representations are oriented by the position of individuals in the social space, it becomes difficult to classify the production of ideas about life in society into two categories that depend on criteria such as truth and error. The only way is to stop claiming a point of view hovering above a mass of blind people.

The second conception, developed by anthropologist Dumont (1977), is a positive and non-polemical version of the notion. It is based on the concept of collective representation and encompasses a much wider array of social phenomena: values, norms, beliefs, meanings, symbols and customs. It emphasizes the necessity of a common framework: in a given social space at a given moment in time, people are sharing the same intellectual heritage, a set of shared beliefs integrated into the institutions, committed to action and thus rooted in reality. This cultural conception of ideology delineates the range of expected and accepted behaviour in a particular context, the constraints on the range of human action and expectations of the present players, the rules of the game and how the game is played.

For Marxists, the culturalist definition is inside their definition. Therefore all other conceptions are seen as nothing more than a distortion of reality. On the contrary, 'ideology as a distortion' can be seen as one of the pathologies of a wider conception of 'ideology as a factor of integration', if we accept the distinction between legitimacy and legitimization¹ (Chiapello, 2003). Legitimacy emphasizes those representations that, by ensuring a shared description of the world and enabling each person's action, help to reinforce the stability of social order. Ideology as a function of integration produces legitimacy for an order constituted by conventions generally accepted in a society. Legitimacy is that which those who are being governed grant, more or less tacitly, to those who are governing them. However, ideology also produces legitimization to those who are in a dominant position because there is always a de facto variance between the models that are assumed and concrete achievements. When this variance is neither detected nor criticized, those who are in a position of dominance enjoy excessive power.



Consequently, their legitimacy claim is greater than the belief in their legitimacy and this production of legitimization introduces distortion. If ideology gives unity to a set of collective representations in return it neither precludes distortion or contradiction.

What is marketing ideology?

Few authors within the marketing literature use the term ideology (Alderson, 1965: 336, is an exception). While, for Marxist tradition, ideology is pure distortion of reality, for marketing doctrine, ideology does not exist.

Cochoy (1998) chronicles how marketing knowledge evolved from its early days. The formalization and dissemination of marketing principles and tools led to the construction of marketing professions, reinforcing the need and presence of marketers in the economy. Wilkie and Moore (2003) give some clues of the impact of this process on US society. The general implementation of the same collective framework, techniques and devices reinforces the efficiency of the management of markets and contributes to the generalization of market economy. Halfway between economics (science) and management (practice), marketing is a practice equipped by science. It is not a science, like physics or astronomy, because many facets of the marketing processes will not submit to scientific tidiness. Marketing is a 'performative science',² conceptualizing and enacting market economy at the same time. It is the discipline codifying market economy that simultaneously describes and constructs its subject matter.

Marketing can thus be construed as having three layers:

- 1 it is a practice: all actions and deeds conducted by marketing practitioners or professionals close to them (segmenting a market, targeting prospects, positioning products);
- 2 it is a branch of knowledge: the codified principles and tools (segmentation, marketing mix, product life cycle . . .) used by marketers; and
- 3 it is an ideology: the enduring beliefs and collective representations (perspectives, frame of reference, viewpoints) shared by marketers.

Regarding layer 2, we use the definition provided by classical marketing (AMA, 2005). This choice is not random. Such a doctrine, developed from the 1950s onwards, is acknowledged as *the* marketing. Of course the practice of marketing (layer 1) began well before marketing's codification (layer 2) and the spread of the discipline results from the interactions between those layers.

As justifications of marketing action become more accepted and taken-for-granted, marketing practices become more institutionalized. Marketing ideology (layer 3) works as the collective action frame of marketers and the extreme generalization of marketing vocabulary shows the pervasiveness of marketing ideology. Its imprints are found in the constant use by all sorts of actors in every kind of situation of its metaphors. This is so because marketing doctrine strives to have its



frame of reference shared by a lot of people and specifically, consumers (Marion, 2004).

Halfway between science and practice, marketing is constantly transforming itself. We can see traces of these transformations, for instance, in the successive 11 editions of Kotler's textbook, *Marketing Management*, (Kotler, 2003) which, since 1967, has strived to adapt to current trends. Marketing consultants and academics develop ever-changing middle-range theories, borrowed from various social sciences and applied to market data. That is why there are two levels within the configuration of ideas of marketing ideology: those which account for marketing and distribution as a long-run social and economic process, and those which resonate at a given period of time and within a given region of the world.

Marketing ideology functions and content

Marketing ideology is useful for people playing the marketer's role to alleviate the tensions to which they are subject. Following Sutton et al. (1956), three types of tension can be identified: (1) tensions stemming from criticism of the dominant position of successful and worldwide brands that can undermine the marketer's belief that brand and market economy values are consistent with the general values of society; (2) tensions originating from the contradictory demands put to the marketer by different stakeholders (customers, stockholders, employees, government, etc.); and (3) tensions deriving from the conflicting demands of other social roles that marketers (and especially women) must play outside the firm in family, community and various informal groups. Marketers adhere to their particular kind of creed³ to resolve emotional conflicts, overcome the doubts, and alleviate the anxieties engendered by the actions that their roles compel them to take. The first function of marketing ideology is to help marketers to maintain their ability to meet the demands of their occupation. It provides arguments that justify their commitment to marketing and renders this commitment attractive and stimulating (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

To demonstrate that marketing actually deserves its position, marketing ideology provides a doctrine organized through two 'safety belts'. The first one is the oldest and results from the influential heritage from traditional economics; it produces legitimacy. The second has been tightened since the enthusiastic (re)discovering of the so-called 'marketing concept' by businessmen; it produces legitimization.

Marketing ideology produces legitimacy

Marketing ideology, as a factor of integration, organizes a set of shared representations that facilitate cooperation and coordination among market actors. It produces legitimacy for marketing activities because it provides reasons to all market actors for accepting the way in which market economy is organized. The



legitimacy of marketers stems from what those they interact with grant them by acknowledging their right to act: shoppers, customers and consumers, as well as people in other departments of their company. Marketing ideology produces legitimacy insofar as those who are involved in consumer society believe in this legitimacy. It is providing answers to such questions as: what is consumption? What is a customer/consumer? What is a market? What is competition? What are the consequences for the common good?

It refers frequently to the *Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776) in order to: (1) underline the propensity in human nature 'to truck, barter and exchange' (Book 1, Chapter II); (2) assert the logical priority of consumption over production and stress the necessary influence of consumers over producers 'Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer' (4, VIII); (3) use the 'invisible hand' metaphor (4, II); (4) define the role of 'self-interest' and/or 'self-love' (1, II); and (5) define the rules of competition and the role of 'market price' (1, VII). It refers, more rarely, to *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 1759) in order to suggest that *sympathy* (1, 1) is a foundation of customer orientation which asks marketers and salesman to place themselves, by imagination, in the consumer situation.

The consumer is defined as the one who chooses from among the offerings on the market in a more or less calculating way. Because 'no client means no business', competition will force firms to either learn the best way to serve the market or go out of business. The market is first an area (actual, potential, virtual) within which there is a demand for a certain product (the marketplace), it is also a price-making mechanism. Competition, even if not pure and perfect, is the surest means for the customer to benefit from the best product at the best cost. Marketing doctrine reminds us that, in a market economy, everything that is beneficial for the individual is also beneficial for society, and that the one criteria for common good is the general growth of wealth, whatever or whoever is the beneficiary. Moreover, a free market and prospering consumption economy foster freedom and democracy. However, marketing is seen as a low-profile function concerned mostly with distribution.

Material progress, efficiency and effectiveness in satisfying needs, and the exercising of economic and political freedom constitute the first safety belt of marketing ideology that produces strong legitimacy. It is a set of justifications that emphasizes individual concerns and interests, as well as social and collective interests. The latter are the more powerful because, rather than focusing on individual interest, justifications supported with economic and political freedom produce moral legitimacy – the socially accepted norms and mores, the 'right thing to do'. Marketing legitimacy is the generalized assumption that marketing actions are desirable and appropriate within the market economy. This legitimacy reflects the congruence between the behaviour of marketers and the shared beliefs of customers/consumers within the system of norms, values and definitions provided by the market economy.



Marketing ideology produces legitimization

Advocates of marketing add a second safety belt to the marketing doctrine. The continuous reiteration of the marketing concept's promises provides an interpretative schemata legitimizing marketing practices. Selectively framing the relationships between the firm and the market, it seeks prescriptions providing answers to 'how to' questions: how to satisfy and delight the consumer? How to keep customers loyal? How to manage successful companies and organizations? First, it transforms marketing into a strategic tool for senior management and, second, it transforms marketing doctrine into an institutionally legitimated 'science' supported by academic research, education and doctoral programmes. Three arguments account for the existence of the marketing discipline: (1) consumer's sovereignty and alignment of firm and customer's interests; (2) economic evolution; and (3) marketing's universality.

Consumer's sovereignty, customer orientation and firm's interest

With the marketing concept not only does the customer come first but also the interests of firm and consumer align. A customer orientation is the logical basis – a commonsense philosophy – for 'good' profit in a consumer-sovereign economy. Identification and satisfaction of customer's needs are the keys to prosperity. The 'king' (customer) requires that her/his needs be satisfied. S/he will determine what and how much will be made, when it shall be made and what s/he will pay for it. However, to serve the customer has a cost. Yet the desire to please – delight, enchant – can be carried too far. Therefore firms must determine the break-even point for itself in order to achieve good profit by giving the customer/consumer what s/he wants. All market participants being equal and free, consumers can choose among offerings and brands just as firms (marketers) can choose among consumers. Since markets are heterogeneous and changing, then marketers define homogenous segments of demand and manipulate the elements of the marketing mix to better adapt a firm's supply to market demand – in other words, target segment(s). By concentrating resources on a responsive segment a firm can often increase its competitive advantage.

Economic evolution

There is a gradual developmental process of firms toward a customer/marketing orientation – seen as a progress implemented by enlightened firms. Moreover, economic/business history is conceived as a sequence of successive eras which place marketing as the end result of an irreversible process/progress. This sequence strives to present the series of steps as natural. Marketing textbooks refer usually to Keith (1960) and outline the production era, the selling era, and then the marketing revolution. Both production and selling eras are seen as past orientations. The production orientation aligns with a 'supplier's market' era when firms were faced with an insatiable demand for anything that could be



produced. A selling orientation emphasizes 'pushing' a company's product or services to sometimes unwilling customers. A customer orientation is seen as the best orientation and others must be denounced because managers have to be shielded from their influences. A customer or market orientation is the future for any firm as well as for economic evolution.

Marketing universality

Marketing doctrine conceptualize the whole economy as a system of markets and, within firms, marketers try to get everyone to practice marketing. Everything, everywhere can be seen as a 'product' (goods, services, ideas, money, jobs, education . . .) and any individual can be seen as a consumer/customer (patient, student, art lover, donor, employee, citizen . . .). All social actors are to be transformed into consumers (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Marketing provides a useful set of concepts for guiding all organizations worldwide. Social regulation through marketing and the market is desirable because every organization performs 'marketing-like' activities whether or not they are recognized as such. No organization can avoid marketing and this recognition ties marketing economic activity to a higher social purpose.

Loosening the safety belts: the role of criticism

In order to examine marketing's contribution to (US) society, Wilkie and Moore (1999: 200) define it as a huge system which incorporates classic distribution functions, marketers' plans and programmes, actions by consumers, and actions by government. Such an 'aggregate marketing system' is close to the American version of the whole market economy. Therefore it is difficult to evaluate the unique contribution of marketers. We are more humble and concentrate on the safety belts of marketing ideology.

The more compelling and convincing a justification supporting marketing practice is, the less the justification needs to be sustained in order to maintain the practice. Therefore, as marketing becomes more widely diffused and accepted, the frequency and number of justifications should decrease. Why then should a widely adopted practice such as marketing require justification to maintain its adoption? The answer is: criticism. On the one hand, thanks to the first safety belt, marketing ideology produces legitimacy for a marketer insofar as s/he satisfies the requirements of 'true' competition and transparent information. On the other hand, criticism questions whether competition is always strong enough to force firms to cater fully to the market and whether it is reasonable to see the market as independent of firm actions. It argues that firms operating in competitive markets sometimes have a lot of room for following their own preferences. It strives to reveal the moral pretensions that hide realities such as power imbalance.

Thus, marketing doctrine must incorporate a response to criticism if it wants marketers to remain legitimate. It is the 'price to pay' if customers/consumers



are to consider marketing activities – and firms which implement them – to be legitimate. In other words, marketing ideology acts both as a justification for the marketing action *and* as a constraint on the marketing process. It legitimates market order and provides reasons for accepting marketers' activities but it also constrains them. We could even say that it only provides legitimacy as it acts as a constraint upon it (Chiapello, 2003: 10). Marketing ideology is seen as a pool of justifications useful both for marketers and criticism.

To assess marketing doctrine we have to consider that it strives to be consistent with the democratic conception of justice which postulates the equal distribution of basic liberties and the fair equality of opportunities. Otherwise, why criticize marketing ideology? Suffice to reject it as a ruling class ruse. We have to believe too that those who are interested by marketing doctrine are neither manipulated nor blinded by it. This means that we consider that all people, decently informed about market exchange, must be granted the same elementary capacities as social scientists when it comes to questioning ideologies.

The role of criticism is to doubt the effectiveness of the production of legitimization by marketing ideology. Skills are essential to reveal the abilities mobilized by gurus' texts in using metaphor and rhetoric to provide a literature that talks of an enchanting world which no one has ever really encountered. It is easy to uncover some contradictions. We know now that the production era is historically a myth (Fullerton, 1988) and that the unlikely 'Copernican revolution' – the customer moving to the centre of the business universe according to Keith (1960) – has been announced periodically at least since the 1930s (Marion, 1993). Other justifications are more difficult to criticize. The alignment of firm and consumer interests raises several questions: who is defining the consumer to be served? How is s/he defined? How are customer requirements identified and anticipated? We suggest that the main issue is the peculiar anthropology of marketing doctrine. The economic evolution issue raises the question of prophecy. Both justifications are connected with the universal claim of marketing doctrine.

A peculiar anthropology

Marketing needs a definition of Human (consumer as well as marketer) consistent with the 'laws of nature' because taken-for-grantedness needs universal statements. The self-interested individual from economics provides the first representation of the consumer: a rational economic actor oriented toward the maximization of a product use value ('utilities' for economics, 'benefits' for marketing).

Latent and expressed needs

To understand the relationship between various marketing stimuli and the consumer's response, marketers looked for a theory of needs and motives. Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' (1954) was the providential tool to explain why people are driven by particular needs at a particular time. For most marketers of the 1960s



this hierarchy was universal and they were not interested by the fact that many people from Asian backgrounds are perplexed by the idea that 'self-actualization' could be more important than 'status' within one's community. Clever marketing scholars make no more reference to Maslow's scale. But they still take needs as a cornerstone. As they are aware of the controversy over whether needs can be created they argue that needs can be expressed and/or latent and conclude that marketing does not create or invent needs but merely allows them to surface. Hunger, thirst, discomfort, esteem – these are latent needs and when they are aroused to a sufficient level of intensity they become a motive. Thus the consumer's response to marketing programmes is the expression of a need.

But what does marketing doctrine mean exactly by 'latent' need? Latent means unexpressed; needs are latent until activated by marketers. Thus we are facing an entity that by definition is impossible for buyers to articulate. But, where do latent needs come from? Mainstream economics cautiously assumes that needs are exogenous – an independent variable that should be explained by anything other than economic relations. However, the marketer is paid to open the 'black-box' and marketing textbooks detail factors affecting the rational decision-making process of the buyer. When marketing doctrine has to answer to the critic, it argues that latent needs are not constructed but 'given'. In doing so it frees marketers from any mediation role and any responsibility. Moreover, needs appear as the starting point of the deductive approach provided by marketing doctrine. Needs are changing but do exist and are exogenous to marketer's action. This certainty gives self-confidence to the marketer's action.

Of course there is no guarantee of success, for marketers cannot automate the production of customers and cannot manufacture consumer's consent. But this is not the point, the issues are: (1) what is the marketer's contribution to the emerging process of needs?; and, (2) what is the effect of an environment saturated with messages and devices exhorting individuals to consume? Marketing does not acknowledge these issues because it pays attention only to competing products and social spaces relevant to offerings and, on the demand side, to social groups engaged in an equally limited form of observation. It does not attend to the behaviour of the global system. However, marketers collectively contribute largely to economic change by the development of, for instance, the minivan, Walkman, Viagra or CNN. They influence, in so doing, consumer's collective representations of objects (products, services, places etc.) as well as collective representations of consumers' needs and motives. Before George Eastman's invention, few people had had the goal of taking photographs. Kodak devised the notion of 'amateur photography' and, at the same time, defined the object that would convince everybody to take photographs (Latour, 1987: 115).

Meanings and information

It is not a matter of coercion. Changes of values come from people themselves, but marketers change representations as to what is in line with consumers' values. They provide goods, services, messages and atmospheres, and consumers have to



make sense of their resulting consumption experience. People attribute meanings to objects and these meanings reflect the collective representations to which they have been exposed and presently operate. People presume objects to have specific meanings but they are always dependent on the interpretation of others for the confirmation of the reality of their experience. A consumption experience is produced not by nature but by society and marketing practices.

As we take much of our own reality for granted, the most compelling evidence for multiple realities and the relevance for people's activity of its own structured reality may come from cross-cultural research. Rationality is itself a culturally variable concept. The individual as an autonomous entity exercising free choice in pursuit of her/his interest is a modern western construct. Market society both causes and requires change in human values. Markets engender increased self-attributing of responsibility (Sampson, 1977). Thus, the concept of a person entailing agency and individuality renders some persons better equipped to operate in market concepts than others.

Marketers have long played a mediating role in this process and have occupied a central position in the market economy. They contribute to the development of a cult of innovation in which we honour the new over the enduring. In so doing they produce informationally imperfect consumer markets because marketing supplies the vast preponderance of information-persuasion messages and because products become more complex and quality less easily evaluated. It is possible that marketing, as a mercenary for anyone who can hire it, can be enlisted to oppose the habits it is accused of sustaining (demarketing?). It is possible that marketing 'science' provides a neutral tool-box. But, marketers are paid to seek for new opportunities, to create markets and develop market shares, to create revenues from new customers buying products or services that yesterday they did not know they needed and today cannot live without. This is the power of marketing and when marketing gurus deny this power, marketing ideology produces legitimization, in other words, dissimulation and distortion.

The place of resistance

Marketing doctrine argues that people want to feel unrestrained by social norms of the past and demand freedom to do their own things as long as it is a self-regarding action. But, people also demand the right to contradict the pre-formatted meanings and the 'ready-to-think' messages provided by marketers. The consent of consumers is never finally won, elements of resistance always remain, and the degree of consent/dissent will vary considerably among the readers of this page. This is more optimistic than the Marxist vulgate that regards marketing as having been created to maintain dominance with advertising and the media as responsible for creating false consciousness.

Traces of resistance and contradictions may be identified by critical analysis of texts. This will show, for instance, that there is no symmetry between the supposed marketer's rationality and consumer's rationality and, worse, the supposed (ir)rationality of the female consumer. Whether or not contradictions are actually



taken up and acted upon can be established by study of the practices of every day life (Certeau, 1984) and 'thick description' of consumption meanings. This will show, for instance, how consumption meanings and practices are negotiated from mass media images and objects.

A theory of evolution?

Marketing doctrine argues that what the market economy has achieved works pretty well and any kind of tampering with it in a radical way will almost certainly make things worse. It is because societies broke loose from the norms and constraints of old institutions and let the market work that advanced industrial nations have achieved economic progress. Therefore, marketing doctrine assumes that the present economic evolution means progress. But, how do we explain this tendency?

Natural selection?

Marketing gurus claim that present evolution is a clear march to progress toward a higher and better form of economy and society. The argument is that competition will force firms in that direction. This process is (more or less implicitly) seen as a natural evolution through 'natural selection', in other words, the idea that firms, like animals and plants, compete in a struggle for existence in which natural selection results in 'survival of the fittest'. This social Darwinism suggests that firms are in militaristic competition with each other and that the fittest firms are the ones that emerge successful in the battle.

This analogy is wrong. It is not possible to describe cultural change as a process of natural selection. The attempt to apply this theory to the business world forgets that, in human culture, acquired characteristics can be passed on to the next generation. It is called learning. So the analogy to natural evolution does not work. The standard of success is defined by the most efficient extant firms, not the efficiency that is theoretically possible. The possibility that the market system is locked into paths that are not globally optimal is still open. In particular, learning processes may be very path dependent and the 'best' technologies are often barely adequate. Economic history points out that the overall economy could follow a path that is partly decided by chance, is history dependent, and is less than optimal. Thus, when marketing ideology asserts that economic evolution tends towards some state that is globally optimal, it is producing legitimization.

Marketing prophecy

No marketing theory provides a general analysis of why institutional evolution took the path that it did and not another one. Marketing gurus know perfectly well, or have the intuition, that the future is not a state to be foreseen but a state to be created. It is a prospective state, one of the many possible states. Therefore



they know that they can, and have to, contribute to the realization of what they consider the desired state. How can they contribute? By providing a vision of the future sufficiently optimistic to be desirable and sufficiently credible to mobilize people in order that they take actions which will promote such a future state. On the one hand that is why it has to be shown that the gradual adoption of marketing is the result of the economic system's historic trend toward the market economy, so that it is taken for granted. On the other hand, it also has to be shown that this situation must be 'made to exist'. The acknowledgement of eras in Keith's fashion is not a work of historiography, it is the rhetoric of a project. A prophecy which, like any prophecy, is made to have an effect on the future.

Marketing literature is replete with such rhetorical operations. Gurus know that their speech is intended to have effects on the future in providing a vision. Such a project suggests a desirable future and tries to engage present action in reaction/anticipation to this desired state. Moreover, the past is 'open' to interpretation, while the future, as the cause of present action, is 'fixed'. The past is open, to the extent that it is rewritten according to the new prescription – in other words, the error of the past *versus* the new and 'real' marketing to be adopted. Therefore the number and content of previous eras to be denounced are incessantly changing. For instance, if we follow the most recent attempt of denunciation we have noticed in Sheth et al. (2000), market orientation and 'demand management' (p. 61) are denounced in favour of 'customer-centric marketing' (p. 56). The 'fixed point' of marketing theory is thus the prophecy of a brighter future which provides prescriptions in a deductive way. A good marketing prophet is an expert in the art of make-believe.

But, when the time comes to explain social change, marketing doctrine is mute. Moreover, it is unable to understand and explain its own change. Its only themes are: consumers and markets change; firms and consumers interests align through the magic of the marketing concept; and the art of marketing is the art of delighting the customer. However, it is difficult to disentangle the relationships between customer orientation and environmental characteristics (competitive intensity and market and technological turbulences) and what it means to be customer- or market-oriented to continue to evolve. But, marketers fully understand the firm's preference: to be in a position where it can dominate its customers and suppliers by virtue of direct, or indirect, competitors' weaknesses. In fact, any market exchange is a compromise of interests and, for a customer, to accept a compromise does not equate to being delighted. Of course, anybody sharing some experience of buyer/seller relationships knows very well that 'compromise of interests' is a fair description of market exchange. But this is not enough for marketing advocates. They need the clarity of compelling and convincing justifications to avoid equivocation and ambiguity in order to suspend disbelief and achieve marketing taken-for-grantedness.



Marketing universalism?

Segmentation and then hyper-segmentation had become the indisputable rule in marketing: a wider variety of products each tailored to a specialized population creates more buyers in total and less cutthroat competition. For consumers, as mass markets increasingly splinter, individuals have gained more opportunity to express their separate identities through their choices. Marketers and consumers co-produced segmented and fragmented markets as well as consumer culture. As Foucault's line of argument indicates (1988), we not only have to choose a self, but have to constitute ourselves as a self who chooses, in other words, a consumer. As a result, all aspects of our existence are monitored and scrutinized as objects of instrumental calculation in the creation of the self. Therefore, as far as our own economic interests are at stake (at least in the short term), we are all reliant on the market.

Critics can oppose consumer culture for reasons that are external to individual consumption. Ecologists criticize consumption because it ruins the environment. Consumption will be fine once it takes a sustainable form and some advise a move to a simpler life. These external reasons for criticizing consumption deserve attention and support as well as criticisms of extravagant consumption that ties up wealth that should be used to help the poor. But, we suggest that the main issue is the legitimacy of the consumer to be representative of the citizen.

Consumer and/or citizen?

To face up to the taken-for-grantedness of marketing doctrine is thus to face up to the constant striving to acknowledge the cost/advantage calculation from the consumer's view point. How can we depart from this short-term maximizing rationality? Or, more exactly, how can critics as well as marketers understand that people are able to shift from mindset to mindset according to the situation? How can action move between one based on a personal and self-interested frame of action and one based on social values – in other words, regarding other people's sentiments? We have to accept that people shift among multiple logics of action and justifications for each of several domains of social life: economy and market, family and home, polity and citizenship etc. Thus, we can look at the chronic tension which exists between the idea of the consumer and that of the citizen (Lang and Gabriel, 1995). Consumers are free, able to choose, and allowed to express their individuality, whereas the idea of being a citizen implies mutuality and control as well as a balance of rights and duties. Citizens are at once listened to, but also prepared to defer to the will of the majority. In as much as they can make choices, citizens have a sense of superior responsibility. The consumer on the other hand, is self-interested and the marketer provides products and advertising to incite the individual to govern him/herself according to fundamental hedonism for which pleasure, happiness and well-being are synonymous. Marketing doctrine seeks to incorporate the citizen into its image of the consumer by using the concept of votes and ballots: the consumer votes in the market place



in the same way as citizens are voting. In this way of marketing legitimization, the more wealth of purchasing power the consumer has, the more votes s/he gets. According to this view, it is up to citizens as consumers to decide whether they want a service from the state and what quality they are prepared to pay for. On the other hand consumer activists are promoting the notion of citizenship in contradiction to the notion of the consumer. They seek to enlarge the consumer into someone who is responsible and socially aware. Marketing gurus have redefined the citizen as a purchaser, while consumer activists stretch the idea of consumer in the direction of the citizen.

When transforming a citizen into a consumer, marketing ideology is legitimizing marketing action in the civic space. It's extending beyond the legitimate order of the market to introduce its representations and justifications in a different legitimate order: the civic one. In other words, marketing ideology is producing legitimization for its own justificatory regime in an attempt to anchor any social order in its own single common higher principle. What kind of people is this process producing? In 1830, Tocqueville (1947: 311 [1850]) saw the value of self-interested action among American citizens, but he saw as well that it led to an isolating individualism, to the citizen who 'to sever himself from the mass of his fellow and to draw apart from his family and friends . . . leaves society at large to itself'. Marketing ideology helped in shaping the contour and divisions of consumer culture, accentuating what divided people and undermining common concerns. Does the distinction between consumers and citizens remain acute? Yes, if there is some room for criticism. Is it possible to reverse a century of entwined citizenship and consumership? This remains a question or, at best, a conviction.

The dialectical relationships between marketing ideology and criticism

A critical position is not easy because marketing doctrine develops through incorporation of criticism. Let's take some examples. Frank (1997: 54) shows the logic that made rebel youth culture of the 1960s so attractive to advertising leaders and marketers in search for a 'creative revolution'. Cooptation is seen as a process by which rebel subcultures and bohemian cultural style moves from adversarial attitudes and language to the advertising discourse. Through a dialectical model of branding and consumer culture, Holt (2002) explains how contemporary branding principles have evolved historically. The increasing literacy of how branding operates produces reflexivity that challenges the conventional branding techniques which gradually lose their efficacy. According to Holt, the anti-branding movement is now forcing companies to link brand and companies' civic obligations and forcing marketing to evolve. When business-to-business marketing described networks of interactions between buyers and sellers (Håkansson et al., 2004), the worldview of traditional marketing changed. The empirical phenomenon of network, first treated by classical marketing as some kind of exception, is becoming central. Critiques of the traditional model are stronger.



Vargo and Lusch (2004) give us some clues that it could be soon outmoded in favour of a new dominant logic. This means that marketing theory is incorporating new metaphors (relationships, co-production and networks) and adopting and adapting 'new' analytical grids and 'new' tools.

Thus marketing doctrine can co-opt criticism and transform marketing techniques. It can also use several tactics to reject criticism: asserting competition as a sufficient incentive for the marketer; defending, by and large, the vigorous and growing consumption as the chief indicator of a prosperous and a confident community; arguing that criticism clichés provide nothing new; showing that the criticism is wrong and that reality is not what criticism purports it to be; and disarming criticism by presenting critics with a world, the post-modern one for instance, that they no longer know how to interpret. Therefore how can criticism be renewed? Either it is ignored and thus useless, or it is heard and co-opted.

The first safety belt of marketing ideology is very difficult to loosen because the legitimate order which is the framework of marketing action is constituted by conventions inherited from traditional economics and generally accepted in our societies for judging the fairness of market economy. Therefore if alternatives become unthinkable, challenge becomes impossible and marketing becomes unassailable by construction. Taken-for-grantedness represents both the most subtle and the most powerful source of legitimacy. The second safety belt is easier to loosen because the main target is the guru's rhetoric to win conviction and enhance the marketers for action. However, like a fashion, this criticism is considered caustic by the media or the academic field, then more or less quickly adopted and transformed by those it was supposed to criticize.

Yes, the critical process is a never ending one; that is why it has to be continued. And the first target remains the production of legitimization by marketing gurus. Any ground won by marketing ideology has to be constantly defended by marketing doctrine. Marketing practitioners, like any social actors, are placed in an ambiguous and uncertain world. They might not know that certain courses of action are more efficient than others. They may not even know the potential of their own power. This ambiguity allows for the influence of rhetorically savvy consultants or academics, as well as the dissenting voice of criticism which must face the same pervasive lesson of rhetoric: whatever the audience (consumers, students employees or top managers), and whatever is for sale (goods, services, ideas, jobs, management tools) few people can stand much equivocation or ambiguity. Therefore they avoid complex presentations weighing the pros and cons. Colourful and lightly documented ready-to-think affirmations work better than tortuously reasoned explanations.

Conclusion

To create and develop markets, firms need a rather large population of marketers: full time professionals (brand managers, marketing directors, ad people . . .); part-time professionals (engineers, technical sales reps, key account managers . . .);



professionals around them (market researchers, consultants, package and product designers. . .); and marketing academics. To practice marketing those people need principles and tools, as well as good reasons to be committed to their job and to justify their activities around them. Because individuals that have to play the marketer's role strive to alleviate the tensions to which they are subject, they choose among existing models that have been legitimated and legitimized in the marketing field. In doing so they attempt to justify a particular way of looking at the world. But if the world has a meaning, it is because actors are constructing and reconstructing intentions and accounts, and thereby their own and other's identities. If collective representations exist it is because they are continually being created and recreated. This leads to the dialectic relationship between the production of marketing ideology and the production of criticism. In the absence of any robust marketing theory the production of legitimacy and legitimization serves as a proxy for an unlikely marketing science: it provides a belief system about economic and social relations as well as economic evolution. Therefore, the uncovering of a lack of consistency in this production, or the discovery of a new set of implications viewed as disturbing by adherents to this creed, will favour criticism.

Notes

- 1 I select 'legitimization' rather than 'legitimation' to refer to the process whereby an entity is justifying its right to exist, while 'legitimacy' is referring to cultural conformity rather than self-justification.
- 2 This word is coined on Austin's (1975) notion of performative utterance in linguistics: those speech acts that simultaneously say and do what they say: 'I now pronounce you man and wife', 'I declare the meeting open'.
- 3 While I borrow 'creed' from the religious lexicon, I tend not to get confused between the marketing ideological process and the religious process of belief. The former tries to connect its statements with scientific knowledge pretending to decipher reality, while the latter does not pretend to be connected with any scientific knowledge.

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