



## Sources of immoderation and proportion in marketing thought

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The core argument of Bernard Cova's provocative article, 'Thinking of Marketing in Meridian Terms', is well worth examining. The notion that marketing would benefit from a better sense of proportion resonates because so much evidence suggests that the discipline, both as a practice and as an ideology, has become increasingly pervasive, not just in its North American heartland, but around the world. As Johnny Johansson (2004) so aptly puts it, marketing today is simply 'in your face'. Advertising, for example, has found ever more ways to present itself to audiences – think of spam email and annoying web pop-up messages – in addition to the already saturated print, broadcast, postal, and out-of-home media. Sisodia and Backer (2004) contend that advertising has exhausted the consumer commons or the collective attention span of consumers. People have fought back by purchasing software and electronic devices (VCRs, TiVo) that block or skip over unwanted messages. Even relatively marketing-tolerant US consumers have rebelled. Over 85 million telephone numbers have been listed on the Federal Trade Commission's 'do-not-call' registry restricting telemarketing (FTC, 2005), and broad political support exists for passing additional restrictive laws.

A palpable sense of marketing excess is fueled by more than intrusive advertising, however. Johansson (2004) lists many additional instances – from unnecessarily aggressive products like the Hummer to increasing worldwide rates of obesity to the spread of deeply anti-global and anti-American attitudes – that make him and others uneasy with the present direction of marketing actions and their consequences. Adding to this apprehension is the sheer ubiquity of the marketing ethos. Marketing concepts and managerial approaches have spread well beyond business transactions into myriad nooks and crannies of everyday life. Non-profit organizations of all kinds have learned to interface with their patients, students, supporters, donors, and so on, not just as traditional social and cultural institutions, but in terms of being service providers that create customer satisfaction through integrated marketing programs. In a number of countries, religious



groups vigorously peddle their dogmas and solicit contributions with as much calculation and technological sophistication as employed by any consumer products manufacturer.

This commentary will explore some possible sources of immoderate marketing behaviors inherent in marketing thought and its evolution. These propensities result from the grounding of marketing in a neo-liberal and distinctly American world view; the ascendancy of a managerial paradigm focused on customer satisfaction, competitive strategy and tactics, and continuous sales growth; and the application of marketing principles to an ever-broader range of international and non-commercial institutions and exchanges. Next, the discussion will shift to alternative intellectual traditions in the societal domain that bring a much needed sense of proportion to marketing. The focus will be upon macromarketing and three of its affiliate fields: environmental marketing, marketing and development, and marketing history.

## **Sources of immoderation in marketing thought**

### **The neo-liberal legacy**

When modern marketing thought first emerged as a separate discipline around 1900, its theoretical foundations were based in large part on classical and neo-classical economics (Bartels, 1988; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Like its parent disciplines, marketing assumed the existence of private enterprise, competitive firms, the rule of law, and the free international movement of goods, services, and capital. Marketing theory also adhered to the philosophies of individualism and utilitarianism. Marketing had flourished under capitalism and its teachings were naturally sympathetic to the creation of markets for allocating resources and organizing society.

This viewpoint, today usually referred to as neo-liberalism, has been debated endlessly, but perhaps even its staunchest defenders will admit that market systems work best within some framework of government regulation. Market players need adult supervision to prevent and if necessary remedy collusion, monopoly, and other predatory practices that harm consumers, competitors, and the economy at large. Different societies have created diverse market systems with some, such as the 'shareholder' capitalism of the USA and Britain, favoring neo-liberal ideals more than, say, the 'stakeholder' capitalism of Germany and Japan. Although a potential for marketing immoderation exists in all forms of capitalism, it would appear that the risk is higher in a more staunchly neo-liberal economy where socially imposed limits on market behavior (laws, regulations, norms) are weaker and less diligently enforced. Marketing thought developed within just such a system. For decades, the lion's share of the field's literature and teaching flowed out from US universities. America's powerful sense of individualism, its exuberance and fierce competitiveness, and its decided tilt toward innovation and modernity over custom and tradition, when combined with neo-liberal freedoms,



infused marketing thought and practice with a strong capability for immoderation and excess.

There was a countervailing intellectual force in early marketing thought. Influenced by the German historical school, many late 19th-century economists rebelled against the prevailing *laissez-faire* tenets of their discipline. They dealt with real economic problems and, in turn, passed on this institutional approach to the students who became some of the earliest marketing educators (Jones and Monieson 1990). Thus, during the first half of the 20th century, as a growing literature addressed and classified marketing functions, commodities, and institutions, it generally conceptualized marketing as a macro system interacting with the larger society. Concerns over salient social issues such as pricing practices, the costs of distribution, and the value of advertising acted as a counterweight to the neo-liberal assumptions in marketing thought. However, attention to marketing's relationship with society waned in the 1950s and 1960s, as another perspective gained currency (Shaw and Jones, 2005; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Known as the managerial school, this paradigm identified strongly with corporate decision-makers and concentrated upon satisfying the needs of autonomous consumers.

### The managerial ascendancy

Marketing management asserts consumer sovereignty as its most fundamental principle and touts consumer satisfaction as its primary goal. This doctrine generally does not make moral judgments about consumer preferences and, therefore, marketers are fully justified in doing whatever it takes to fulfill (and encourage) demand so long as everything is legal and socially acceptable. With such principles in mind, automobile companies sell highly profitable trucks and SUVs as personal transportation, even though their prodigious gasoline consumption worsens local air quality, contributes to global warming, and increases dependence on unreliable middle-eastern nations. Not to be outdone in amorality, the US firearms industry has engaged in a literal arms race by designing more effective products (deadlier bullets, larger magazines), aimed at underserved target markets (youths, women), distributed through a network of 90,000 licensed (but loosely regulated) small dealers, and promoted by nurturing a culture of fear (Diaz, 1999). Granted, guns have a unique history in America and their ownership is accorded some constitutional protection, not to mention ferocious political cover, but this blithe, textbook application of the marketing mix surely must strike many people around the world as nothing short of lunacy.

Furthermore, marketing management generally accepts sales growth as a primary business objective. Except for occasional worries over anti-trust implications, very little attention is paid to setting upper limits to marketing metrics such as number of units sold, market share, and profitability. In practice, the marketing of savings (e.g. college funds and retirement accounts) rather than spending, or the 'de-marketing' of certain categories of objectionable consumption (e.g. cigarette smoking and other drug use), are noteworthy, but relatively minor endeavors in comparison with the overwhelming encouragement to buy and

consume ever more goods and services. Marketing management is deeply wedded to the 'dominant social paradigm' of free markets, individual choice, and continuous economic growth (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Environmentalists would argue that this leads to excess which is exhausting resources as predicted by the gloomy scenario of the tragedy of the commons (Shultz and Holbrook, 1999).

### Broadening marketing management internationally and institutionally

Two trends have broadened marketing thought over the past 30 years. First has been the internationalization of the field's teaching and research. Marketing courses are now offered in virtually all countries, often by faculty educated in the USA. As the ads in the weekly *Economist* demonstrate, MBA programs abound globally, including some joint ventures with US-based universities. Regional associations of marketing academics have been formed in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Other scholarly groups either have added overseas conference venues or have been global from the outset. Although the managerial approach and its consequences seem to receive more critical scrutiny outside North America, this school of marketing thought still dominates. Interestingly, when the Soviets published their first western marketing text in 1980, they chose Philip Kotler's signal work, *Marketing Management* (Fox et al., 2005).

Judging from some of its leading textbooks (see, e.g. Cateora and Graham, 2005; Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2004), the field of international marketing is largely an extension of the managerial model. Writers generally respect cultural differences as an important environmental variable and take great pains to explain that local adaptation of the marketing mix is the *sine qua non* of international marketing. Nevertheless, they tend to assume the inevitability of cultural change and desirability of innovation. Consider, for example, the following paragraph from Cateora and Graham:

Although cultures meet most newness with some resistance or rejection, that resistance can be overcome. Cultures are dynamic, and change occurs when resistance slowly yields to acceptance as the basis for resistance becomes unimportant or forgotten. Gradually there comes an awareness of the need for change, or ideas once too complex become less so because of cultural gains in understanding, or an idea is restructured in a less-complex way, and so on. After a need is recognized, it may be impossible to prevent the acceptance of a new idea. For some ideas, solutions to problems, or new products, resistance can be overcome in months; for others, approval may come only after decades or centuries. (2005: 117)

Like the assimilator Borg in the Star Trek films, this message conveys inexorability: 'Surrender, global consumers, your resistance to change is futile!' The authors go on say that companies can choose between the strategies of 'unplanned change' and the more proactive 'planned change'. They do acknowledge that some change can be socially dysfunctional – Nestlé's infant formula debacle is used as the one case in point – and that marketers have a responsibility for negative consequences of marketing efforts, whether intentional or not. However, the recommendation is not to refrain from cultural interference, but 'to design pro-



grams not only to gain acceptance for a product but also to eliminate any negative cultural effects' (p. 119). This position carries a risk of immoderation.

A second trend in paradigm broadening has been the application of management technologies – such as consumer research, target marketing, and persuasive communications – to a wider and wider array of non-profit organizations and exchanges. This expansion of marketing thought, spearheaded by Kotler and Levy (1969), has become the conventional wisdom in textbooks (Shaw and Jones, 2005; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). At the same time, the diffusion of marketing ideology and practice throughout society contributes to a sense of unease. If politics, religion, health, education, and welfare are all imbued with a marketing ideology, then marketing is almost unavoidably 'in your face' and perhaps even oppressive.

As an illustration, consider applying marketing management tools to social causes. Social marketing would appear to be a noble endeavor – who can argue with programs to create healthier lifestyles or ameliorate poverty and oppression – but ethical dilemmas definitely exist starting with paternalism and asymmetric moral relationships with targets. Ironically, these two downsides may actually be less pronounced in strictly commercial exchanges (Brenkert, 2002). Moreover, the sponsors of social marketing programs may not always be above reproach and some may even be using its techniques to perpetuate unjust systems. Finally, social marketing projects may have as much potential to undermine local cultures in developing nations as do the marketing programs of multi-national corporations. Empowering women through education, family planning, and micro-credit loans may be a desirable outcome, but also is culturally disruptive (Dholakia and Dholakia, 2001).

## Marketing thought with a sense of proportion

Despite the predominance of the managerial school of marketing thought, many academics have continued to research issues of marketing and society, organize their own conferences around such topics, and publish in specialized journals such as the *Journal of Macromarketing* (founded in 1981) and *Public Policy & Marketing* (launched in 1982). Wilkie and Moore (2003) identify six marketing and society subgroups: public policy and marketing; macromarketing; consumer economics; social marketing; marketing ethics; and international consumer policy. With the possible exception of social marketing, which, like a missionary, spreads the gospel of marketing beyond its commercial origins, these special interests provide an alternative to the managerial mainstream. For the sake of brevity, this section only considers macromarketing – the study of how marketing systems affect society and how society affects marketing systems – by examining three of its component fields: environmental marketing; marketing and economic development; and marketing history. Each of these three areas argues for a sense of proportion.



### Environmental marketing – adding a rider to the marketing concept

A respectable number of marketing academics have closely examined the environmental consequences of marketing practices under rubrics such as ‘green marketing’, ‘environmental marketing’, ‘ecological marketing’, ‘eco-marketing’, and ‘sustainable marketing’ (Fuller, 1999). Originating in the early 1970s, the now sizeable literature they have created is comprised of numerous published papers and a small cottage industry of specialized texts (for a brief review, see Crane, 2000). These writings have challenged micro-managerial assumptions (Kilbourne et al., 1997), while attempting to add an important rider to the marketing concept. Fuller, for example, defines ‘sustainable marketing’ as:

the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the development, pricing, promotion, and distribution of products in a manner that satisfies the following three criteria: (1) customer needs are met, (2) organizational goals are attained, and (3) the process is compatible with ecosystems. (1999: 4)

The third stipulation applies a brake to marketing excess. If taken seriously, marketers would be far more sensitive to developing and promoting environmentally sensitive products. Such products would be less polluting and more energy efficient, more economical of packaging materials, and more easily and safely recyclable. These mandates might not satisfy critics who contend that green marketing has focused more on the symptoms of consumerism rather than on its root causes, a centuries-old ‘productivist’ discourse (Smith, 1998), but environmental thought clearly embodies a sense of proportion.

### Marketing and development – advocating a precautionary principle

Marketing scholars have been concerned with the social and economic development of poor nations since the 1950s (Klein and Nason, 2001). In general, this literature brings a nuanced view of what marketing can achieve (Dholakia, 1984; Dholakia and Dholakia, 1982) and how it might affect less affluent consumers in poor nations (Ger, 1992, 1997; Ger and Belk, 1996; Hirschman, 1986). The group of scholars who would become the International Society for Marketing and Development (ISMD) held their first conference in 1986 and incorporated formally in 1993. In 2000, the membership voted to change the name to the International Society of Marketing and Development, a more neutral title that avoids giving an impression the organization necessarily endorses marketing in developing nations.<sup>1</sup>

Marketing ideas have been applied to family planning, recycling, and micro-credit programs with some success, albeit with nagging issues of appropriate target selection and incentive design on the one hand, and worries about cultural disruption on the other (Dholakia, 1984; Dholakia and Dholakia, 2001). Marketing can also facilitate development through the deliberate export of local culture. Basu (1995) has presented a nice conceptual framework showing how different combinations of consumption desires, craft attributes, intermediaries, and producing organizations constitute key marketing flows. In the area of international



tourism, Belk and Costa (1995) list a number of benefits to the host country including increased employment, incentives for education, hard currency, a stimulus to entrepreneurial activity, conservation, and preservation of local culture.

Yet, whether marketing arts and crafts for export or marketing a destination to inbound visitors, some things will change. By virtue of their connections to outside forces, sources of authenticity are eroded away and, consequently, local cultures will no longer be the same. Worse, cross-cultural contacts may degenerate into quite one-sided relationships where rich world collectors and visitors inadvertently impose forms of cultural imperialism on their hosts through their purchasing power (Belk, 1993; Belk and Costa, 1995). Market-driven culture may inexorably favor the masses, the mediocre, and the superficial. The marketing and development literature tends not to be shrill in its criticism – most contributors are business professors, after all – but it does urge marketing to adopt a precautionary principle for the less affluent world: first, do no harm. This, too, represents a sense of proportion.

### Marketing history – putting marketing in perspective

Marketing scholars have studied the history of their field since the 1930s (Shapiro and Doody, 1968; Shaw and Jones, 2005), but these individual forays did not really begin to gel as a discipline until 1983 when Stan Hollander hosted the First North American Workshop on the History of Marketing at Michigan State University. Since then, marketing historians have met biennially (under a new acronym ‘CHARM’ for the Conference on Historical Analysis and Research in Marketing), have published their work in leading journals, especially the regular history section of the *Journal of Macromarketing*, and have edited special issues of the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Psychology and Marketing*, and *Marketing Theory*.

Historical approaches introduce a sense a proportion by placing marketing in perspective. First, marketing history establishes precedents, stresses intellectual provenance, and deflates claims of originality. Take, for example, the topic addressed by this article. Charges of immoderation and lack of proportion are nothing new; marketing has long been criticized for committing sins of excess. Throughout the 20th century American marketing has been attacked by consumer activists concerned about advertising deceptiveness (Chase and Schlink, 1927; Clark 1943), by alarmists and muckrakers shocked over devious persuasive tactics (Key, 1973; Packard, 1957), and by left-wing writers worried about the global power of brands (Klein, 1999).

Second, historical research debunks ill-informed assertions about the development of marketing. The best example of this tradition has been the critical examination of Robert Keith’s (1960) well-known periodization framework consisting of production, sales, and marketing eras. Numerous introductory texts have revisited this view of marketing history. Yet, in a well-researched (119 citations) article, Ron Fullerton (1988) showed that despite some data backing Keith,



mostly his experience at Pillsbury, the great preponderance of evidence indicated that 'modern' marketing extended back at least to the 1830s in the USA and Germany and, with its earlier industrialization and the leading-edge promotional imagination of Josiah Wedgwood, to the 1760s in Britain.

Finally, historians treat marketing thought as more than just ideas and their evolution (or sometimes immutability) over time. Intellectual history is also about marketing theorists, disciples, teachers, and students, and the eras and places in which they lived. Ideas are picked up, disseminated, and dropped. One respected champion can make a big difference in their acceptance. 'Over historical time, the same idea may seem absurd or inspired; the same evidence profound or trivial' (Fullerton and Punj, 2004: 9). Literature reviews in the social sciences, in contrast, tend to be ahistorical in that they assume static social and cultural environments. History adds perspective and proportion by investigating the human factor in marketing thought.

## Conclusions

Immoderation in marketing has theoretical and historical roots, namely, a neo-liberal legacy and an all-American upbringing. Many early marketing scholars understood the need for proportion, but their institutional and societal concerns were gradually pushed aside as the managerial ideology first became predominant and then increasingly was applied internationally and to non-commercial organizations. Today, evidence is mounting that the trajectory of the field poses greater and greater social, environmental, and cultural risks. Thus, marketing educators should lead a movement toward a more balanced discipline. They should confront marketing excess directly by questioning the managerial paradigm they propagate. Alternative marketing and society schools of thought, such as macro-marketing and its environmental, developmental, and historical components, should be given greater coverage in textbooks, university classrooms, and executive training. Critical thinking begins at home.

Although Cova's application of 'shore-based' concepts to marketing and marketing thought may at first reading seem nothing more than just an entertaining metaphor, recent research suggests otherwise. A pair of studies published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Esposito et al., 2004; Knoop et al., 2004) reported that a Mediterranean diet may hold the key to longevity. Limiting one's consumption of meat and dairy products, drinking a moderate amount of red wine, and taking regular exercise resulted in weight reduction, lower blood pressure, better cholesterol measures, and a lower rate of mortality. If a Mediterranean diet is good for human health, then a Mediterranean approach to marketing may be equally sensible for improving the quality of life everywhere.





## Notes

- 1 Compare the mastheads of the 1999 and 2000 ISMD newsletters available at <http://www.bsu.edu/xtranet/ISMD/org.html> (accessed 11 October 2004).

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Eras of Thought Development”, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 22(Fall): 116–46.

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