
**THE BIFURCATION OF MANAGERIALISM AND SOCIAL SCIENCE IN
MARKETING STUDIES**

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Abstract: The field of marketing studies embraces a striking contradiction. On the one hand, it originated in a spirit of critique and dissent which has since been manifest in a rich, diverse and fiercely contested outpouring of marketing scholarship and research. On the other, it is a highly packaged brand with a remarkably uniform identity as a set of universal managerial problem-solving techniques. This paper explores this deep contradiction, positing the notion of parallel universes of disciplinary space, the one characterised by a critical social scientific orientation, the other by a naïve managerial orientation. While such a dialectical figure may lead to some blurring of important distinctions, this paper suggests that an investigation of some of its historical, political and ideological undercurrents can contribute significantly to a re-orientation of the disciplinary space of marketing studies.

Keywords: marketing studies, managerial problem solving strategies, managerialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

After more than 100 years as a university teaching subject, originally in North America and Germany (Jones and Monieson, 1990; Bartels, 1951) and some 70 years later in Europe, Asia and Africa, marketing studies remains an enigma. It has attained a degree of global success and influence which have been much commented upon (Willmott, 1999; Firat and Dholakia, 2006). Marketing has boomed with the rise of popular management studies in the 1970's, the perceived triumph of capitalism over state planning in the 1990s and the global ascent of university business and management education, and not forgetting the prodigious literary, rhetorical and advocacy skills of gurus such as Peter Drucker, Philip Kotler and Ted Levitt (Aherne, 2006; Brown, 2005). Today, marketing studies enjoys continued success and its web of professional associations, academic research journals and university courses seems to be on a perpetual growth trajectory. The field has been characterised by tension and contest with regard to its aims, values, predominant theories and methods (Levy, 2003), given its status as an ideological and cultural phenomenon (Wilkie and Moore, 2003; Marion, 2006). This tension has been regularly aired in its leading journals, as befits a vibrant and politically and intellectually engaged disciplinary subject.

But, in spite of the scale of its reach and popularity, marketing studies occupies an unenviable position as the butt of the most coruscating criticism to be levelled at any management field, and indeed at any academic discipline, not excluding golf studies and homeopathy. A perusal of its published research papers supports its claims to be a plural and cross-disciplinary enterprise (Wilkie and Moore, 2003) which is engaged with management practice but informed by a critical social scientific spirit of inquiry. At the same time, it stands accused of being an instrument of cultural domination, and of lacking the critical intellectual elements which would render it fit for purpose as a field of thought, and of practice (Lowe et al, 2005; Scott, 2007; Sheth and Sisodia, 2005; Morgan 1992; 2003).

Such diametrically opposing viewpoints can only be explained if marketing studies is two quite different things. This paper posits a putative bifurcation of marketing along axiological and methodological lines. It suggests that marketing studies operates as two parallel universes of disciplinary space, the one social scientific, the other managerial, each mutually dependent but also a mutual challenge to each other's legitimacy. The paper explores the historical, thematic and political influences in this bifurcation with the aim of illuminating some of the many contradictions which define marketing's disciplinary space, and which will inform its orientation in the future.

The paper will firstly reprise some of the key criticisms levelled at marketing studies. It will then review some points in the field's development as a subject of academic study, drawing on historical accounts and thematic analyses. Particular interest falls on accounts of the institutional and political influence over the spread of marketing studies and the development of the marketing concept. Following from this analysis, the paper explores in more detail the charge that marketing is a vehicle of managerial ideology which promotes the individualistic and libertarian values of neo-liberalism. Finally, the paper concludes with implications for the future of marketing's

disciplinary space. The aim, overall, is not to reinvigorate a moribund managerial agenda, nor to move towards a manifesto for critical marketing studies but, rather, to try to pick apart some of the influences which have given rise to the disciplinary schizophrenia of social science and managerialism in marketing studies, and to gain a sense of the kind of intellectual space which might emerge if these are acknowledged and picked apart.

2. CRITICISMS OF MARKETING STUDIES

The crimes of which marketing studies stands accused might surprise even some of its fiercer critics from outside the academy. Lowe et al (2005), for example, argue that marketing studies are deeply implicated in “the material enslavement of modern societies” (no less) because the subject legitimizes ‘amoral scientism’ as the guiding principle of marketing practice (p.198). For these authors, the failures of marketing practice can be traced to failures of marketing research and education. They suggest that a solution lies in formal marketing management and administrative education which is “re-focussed- away from a heavy, positivist, technical orientation and more toward a value reflexive and processual dialectic orientation” (p.199). Among other charges are that marketing legitimizes self-serving corporatism (Klein, 2000), that it wilfully neglects or marginalises ethical issues and environmental concerns in marketing training, education and practice (Smith, 1995; Crane, 2000), and that it negatively affects children’s moral and social development by treating them as marketing means and not as human ends (Nichols and Cullen, 2006). The intellectual standards of academic marketing studies have attracted equally forceful criticism, for, example, failing to develop viable theory (Burton, 2001;2005), for promoting an ahistorical worldview which suppresses important strains of influence in marketing thought (Fullerton, 1987; Tadajewski, 2006a; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008a), for pursuing managerial values at the expense of social, intellectual and ethical values (Thomas, 1994, 1996), for failing to address the gap between academic marketing research and marketing practice (Wensley, 1995; Bolton, 2005; Katsikeas et al, 2004; Piercy, 2002; Gummesson, 2002a; Brownlie et al, 2007), and for pursuing a research agenda which is ‘autistic’ and ‘egotistical’ (Skålen et al, 2008, p.164). In sum, marketing studies stands accused of being part of a relatively ‘homogenous’ and ‘uncritical’ business school agenda which is incapable of “meeting the challenges of either practice or ethics” (Scott, 2007, p.7). As a result, as Scott (2007) notes, it is roundly mocked by academicians of other disciplines. Marketing practitioners have been no less damning in their judgment on the contribution of marketing academics to the field. “People resent Marketing. Marketing has no seat at the table at board level...Academics aren’t relevant. And we have an ethical and moral crisis.” (Sheth and Sisodia, 2005, p.10). A further criticism has focused on the cultural fit of the marketing management model and the way it allegedly universalizes North American values in general (Dholakia et al, 1980) and neo-liberalism in particular (Witkowski, 2005). This charge seems especially paradoxical given the success marketing has enjoyed in non-capitalist, and collective societies. The first marketing text to be adopted in the former Soviet Union was Philip Kotler’s (1967) classic (Fox et al, 2005). In Mediterranean Europe (Cova, 2005) and Scandinavia (Gronroos, 1994; 2004; Gummesson, 2002b) there have been calls for a regional adaptation of marketing theory and practice away from the traditional transaction, Mix-focused approach and toward a more relational and service-based orientation. In Asia, a reaction of ‘techno-orientalism’ (Jack, 2008) has been observed, with Asian cultures adapting the Western managerial model to their own ends, divested of its strains of liberal individualism and tailored to profoundly relational cultural values. Not only that, but Asian countries have even adapted the conspicuous consumption lifestyle to fit the norms of group-oriented rather than individualistic values (Chadha and Husband, 2006).

3. CONCLUSION

Criticisms of marketing’s scope and methods can, apparently, be dismissed by a cursory review of published studies by marketing academics. The discipline has attracted negative attention for its perceived methodological and axiological myopia for some years.

Some other calls for change seem self-contradictory. For example, in one of the occasional critical self-reflection issues of the *Journal of Marketing* Bolton (2005) hints at the perceived failures of the discipline, calling for creative advances in “the science and practice of marketing” (p. 1). Yet this is couched in terms of an example from medical research in-keeping with the *Journal of Marketing*’s stated aim to “contribute generalizable, validated findings” for “new techniques for solutions to marketing problems”¹. The implication is that research in the field should remain guided by managerial values and a positivistic, natural science model of research. Other, similar calls for change are couched in terms of a re-iteration of marketing’s goals as a managerial science (e.g. Hunt, 1991; Day and Montgomery, 1999), each ignoring the possibility that marketing may be more art than science (Brown, 1996; 1997). Many assertions about marketing studies seem to treat the discipline as a relatively uncontested and stable

thing. Yet there is evidence in its development that there have been fundamental disagreements over key issues which have reached only a tentative resolution. One of the most important surrounds the character of the marketing concept itself.

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