

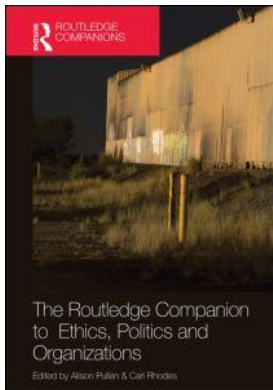
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## **The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations**

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### **‘Between coercion and brainwashing’**

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# 3

## 'Between coercion and brainwashing'

### Theorizing the politics and ethics of marketing

*Amanda Earley and Michael Saren*

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Marketing is concerned with the study of human action in the marketplace, the study of the process of exchange and economic transaction and the intersecting efforts and responses of buyers and sellers in the market.

(Lazer and Kelley, 1960: 30)

Marketing is an approach to producing desired responses in another party that lies midway between *coercion* on the one hand and *brainwashing* in the other.

(Kotler, 1972: 49)

The service-centered view of marketing implies that marketing is a continuous series of social and economic processes that is largely focused on operant resources with which the firm is constantly striving to make better value propositions than its competitors.

(Vargo and Lusch, 2004: 5)

The above quotes are excerpts from foundational, definitional references within the marketing canon. Each is held by mainstream marketing academics to be a watershed moment in the development of marketing theory, wherein our understanding of the nature of marketing was supposedly revolutionized. A critical reading of these accounts, however, reveals more continuity rather than difference in the history of mainstream marketing thought. As seen here, we find that marketing has always been a process of competition and influence within 'free enterprise' economies. Drawing on political theory, the goal of this chapter is to radically reconsider such dominant accounts of marketing along the lines of these commonalities. Namely, given that politics can be defined in terms of competitive practices of power within any social system (Dahl, 1970), we seek to illuminate how marketing is essentially the competitive exercise of power within the market system. With this in mind, the aim of our chapter is to uncover and theorize the inherently political nature of marketing.

The project begins with a review of the early marketing literature, which largely defined the field, and set the tone for a century of marketing practice. Early marketing coursework and research was unabashedly commercial and drew heavily upon profit-maximizing economics, firmly grounding marketing practice in capitalist and managerialist ethics. This fact became somewhat obscured in later marketing research. Here, scholars introduced psychological, sociological and ‘progressive’ ‘social’ perspectives to the discipline, while nevertheless upholding the traditional ethical assumptions of marketing scholarship. As such, the next section critically examines the ethico-political commitments of leading schools of marketing thought, from the marketing concept to the service dominant logic. Throughout, we pay special attention to the ethical position of each conception of marketing; ultimately, we find very little consideration of ethics at all, and extraordinary efforts to divorce the notion of politics from ethics where it does appear.

Next, the chapter turns to the critical marketing literature, which engages with the question of politics on a more regular basis, and entertains alternative notions of ethics. Critical marketing is conceptualized here as an alternative to the apolitical mainstream which sanitizes and legitimates the power of marketing to manipulate people and their desires, not as audiences, citizens, communities or society, but as consumers. Nowadays we hear few voices raising such concerns or analysing such practices. Scholars in the critical marketing tradition have considered marketing amongst other things as an ideology, a social construct and a dominant logic; here, we analyse the politics of these main perspectives. We then present a brief case study of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Here, we consider how the movement functions as an organization that both markets itself and questions the hegemony of marketing logic. In the course of the case study, serious concerns are raised about the ethics and plausibility of marketing progressive political causes, given the inherently capitalist, managerialist, hierarchical and market-constrained nature of such ethics.

The chapter concludes by considering how Alain Badiou’s (2001) work on ethics can possibly be used to gain some insight and synthesize between these motley perspectives on the ethics and politics of marketing. In contrast to a Levinasian perspective, which couches ethics in terms of responsibility to an ‘Other’, Badiou conceptualizes ethics in terms of responsibility to an event, or moment where one becomes conscious of a truth. Truth, here, is defined as knowledge of relationships of power. This account is not only a radical reconceptualization of ethics, but also its relationship to politics. Indeed, ethics are no longer the domain of ‘enlightened’, ‘powerful’ subjects; given that Badiou conceptualizes ethics in terms of a refusal to take power, the least powerful and privileged are the most likely to have ethics. Those in power are considered to be unethical, while those without knowledge are considered to be simply without ethics – ‘neither good nor evil’. With this in mind, serious questions are raised about the ethicality of marketing, given its inherent politics of competition and domination. Ultimately, we contend that ignoring the political nature of marketing is a fatal mistake for managers and their adversaries alike.

## Politics and ethics of mainstream marketing

### *Foundations of the field*

The science or art of marketing, as we know it, has developed largely from the fields of economics, psychology, and accounting. It is entirely possible that archaeologists or historians may sometime discover that many of the principles were known and practiced by ancient peoples. But the classified body of knowledge which we call the science of marketing . . . has been developed very largely by persons still living.

(Converse, 1945: 14)

While marketing activities such as advertising, sales and retailing have a long history, the formalization of marketing practice through academic discourse is much more recent. Though some early work on the subject was conducted within the German Historical School of economics (Jones and Monieson, 1990), the majority of later and current marketing scholarship owes its intellectual heritage to nineteenth-century liberal economics (Coolsen, 1960). From this come many basic assumptions foundational to the discipline. Most importantly, both liberal economics and mainstream marketing scholarship are grounded in the belief that free market capitalism is the ideal, maximally efficient and consequently most ethical system for managing the delivery of goods and services (Coolsen, 1960). This faith is accompanied by a conviction that markets can regulate themselves and that government regulation is unnecessary.

Indeed, the first generation of scholars interested in ‘marketing problems’ were generally economists trained in this tradition who arrived on the scene in the early twentieth century, conducting research on manufacturing, agricultural and distribution topics. They formalized the principles of marketing and sought to educate producers on how to participate in the process of distribution and grow their customer bases (Coolsen 1960; Maynard 1941). In industries where middlemen had been claiming significant percentages of the profit margin (e.g. the milk industry, Vial, 1942; Erdman, 1937), these producers were interested in harnessing the means of distribution for their own interests. These early teachers and researchers were located almost exclusively within the United States, mainly in Midwest universities of Ohio State, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota (Bartels, 1951). At about the same time, comparatively urban schools like Harvard were developing their own marketing curricula, which were generally more focused on the retailing, manufacturing and distribution side of the subject (Bartels, 1951). Though there are cases where they focused on collectivization (Murphy, 1946; Canoyer, 1945; Bennett, 1941; Gault, 1937), the majority were unashamedly commercial, with some courses delivered by correspondence (Maynard, 1942) – perhaps a harbinger of the informalization of business education today (Dunne et al., 2008). Thus, the ‘ethics’ and politics of early marketing scholarship gave no consideration to earlier, alternative approaches to political economy such as Marxism or mutualism, which would have questioned marketing’s assumptions, and thereby its ethics.

### *Early marketing literature: principles in application*

[T]here is the development of methods based on what is sometimes called ‘the primacy of politics over economics.’ What is meant by this is that economic achievements for an arbitrarily restricted group shall be brought about by political pressure and political power. Individual attempts of an enterpriser and even collective achievements within the existing framework are cast aside; it is only political power that matters . . . All such methods, if consistently followed through, lead to the decay of the democratic process.

(Froehlich, 1941: 278)

From these origins until the 1960s, most marketing scholars adopted a highly applied tack – so much so that commissions by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations decried the idiographic and haphazard nature of the marketing scholarship (Gemelli, 1997; Pierson, 1959; Gordon and Howell, 1959). Discussions of ethics and politics in the marketing literature were no exception, as ethico-political principles continued to be rarely if ever explicated in mainstream marketing publications. An example of this approach can be seen in the dialogue between Froehlich (1940, 1941), Reisner (1940) and Ucker (1941) on government regulation of ‘big business’ in Central Europe during wartime. Froehlich equates any regulation of business with fascism, while

Reisner and Ucker argue that regulation can be in the interest of democracy and long-term prosperity, even in a capitalist economy. They argue that this is especially the case during economic crises, when “the ‘little man’ suffers most” (Ucker, 1941: 52), creating conditions that favour the unbridled consolidation of economic power in the hands of a small economic elite. While their discussion raises some important questions about the relationship between government, democracy and commerce, the conversation does not achieve a scholarly level of theoretical development, and it does not directly cite any relevant literature on these subjects. Where it does strive to develop theory, it is ultimately political theory that touches on a marketing phenomenon (retailing); as such, it is an application of theory from another field, rather than the development of marketing theory.

Bennett (1941) presents one of the more systematic political studies of this era, in a very unique context: a completely cooperative town established by the US government in the New Deal era. He considers the effect of the not-for-profit, non-competitive model on price, quality, service and brand attitudes within an American city. Bennett found that a distribution system guided by cooperative ethics, rather than the competitive ethic of market capitalism, actually met consumer needs exceptionally well and made reasonable return on investment. Nevertheless, Bennett’s study exhibits a glaring theoretical omission, the opposite of what we saw in the previous example: he applies marketing theory to a political subject, without considering political theory and its implications for marketing. A political analysis of the same context would have more explicitly attempted to theorize the relationship between economic structure and key indicators of success, and would have questioned whether traditional indicators of success are appropriate in a cooperative economy (Dahl, 1970).

Many other publications of the time are simply book reviews, such as Harold Hardy’s (1956) essay on *The Politics of Distribution*, a text written by Harvard political scientist Joseph Palamountain. Hardy acknowledges the “obvious and continual struggle” (p. 257) across power differentials within markets, and that “the scholarly student or the practitioner familiar with marketing problems will accept without contention Professor Palamountain’s thesis of the interplay of political and economic forces” (p. 257). Ultimately, he argues that political accounts of marketing phenomena should be required reading for marketing students, and that ‘interdisciplinary’ analyses of this sort are essential for marketing as a discipline, as they have the potential to challenge the assumptions of the discipline. Despite such exhortations, it would be decades before power would be adequately theorized in marketing, and even now the concept of politics is not considered foundational to the definition of markets and marketing.

### *Early attempts to theorize ethico-political phenomena*

He who sells anything in the agora (market) shall not ask two prices for that which he sells, but he shall ask one price . . . and there shall be no praising of any goods, or oath taken about them. If a person disobey this command, any citizen who is present, not being less than thirty years of age, may with impunity chastise and beat the swearer.

(*Dialogues of Plato*, 1937, trans, pp. 917–920, as quoted by Kelley, 1956: 63)

Of the two sorts of money-making, as I have just said, one is a part of household management, the other is retail trade: the former is necessary and honorable, the latter a kind of exchange which is justly censured; for it is unnatural, and a mode by which men gain from one another.

(Aristotle’s *Politics*, as quoted by Kelley, 1956: 63)

Despite the trend toward only occasional, superficial and applied ethico-political analyses, a few notable exceptions can be found within the mainstream marketing literature. An early example is William Kelley's (1956) exploration of the place of marketing in political philosophy, from ancient Greek times to the present. Here, Kelley finds marketers were more or less universally disdained in ancient philosophy. Plato argued that the retail trader or marketer was inherently motivated to exaggerate the values of products, as this could increase the economic value obtained. Indeed, he thought that the profit-making ethic conflicted so strongly with the ethics of democracy that retailers should not be citizens of Athens, as they would corrupt the democratic process. Aristotle latched onto this perspective, arguing in his *Politics* (355 BCE) that while the economics of household maintenance was virtuous, retail trade was evil, in that exchange markets were defined by the desire of traders to maximize their value against consumers. Kelley traces the legacy of these philosophies through early Christian and medieval times to the present, ultimately finding a distrust of marketing throughout history. He theorizes that the greater but nevertheless begrudging acceptance of marketers in the contemporary market economy is a necessity of modern capitalism. Surprisingly, after the foregoing discussion of the relationship between trade, democracy and social relations, he finds this totally unproblematic, and even promising.

In 1960, William Lazer and Eugene J. Kelley penned an article on the need for greater interdisciplinarity in marketing, wherein they opined that the philosophy and methods of political science are particularly appropriate for "the development of a more widely applicable and generally useful body of marketing knowledge" (p. 24). In particular, political enquiry is argued to be well positioned for further study of communications, distribution, innovation, product values, management, organization and strategy. A particularly interesting contribution to the theorization of the ethico-politics of marketing can be found in an editorial by Earl W. Kintner (1961), then the recently retired chairperson of the Federal Trade Commission. Here, Kintner attempts to explain to businesspeople why government has a legitimate role in the maintenance of democracy and economy. He presents political and legal theory at its most basic level, considering the question of power in society. The author quotes an uncited source, saying that "'Power is always gradually stealing away from the many to the few, because the few are more vigilant and consistent'" (p. 2). He goes on to warn that "the centralization of a nation's economy", whether by private or public hands, "may well lead to the centralization of its polity" (p. 2) and, with it, a decline in democracy. Ultimately, Kintner argues that the good society can only be achieved with the dispersion of power and the adoption of good ethics by businesses and individuals. While the usurpation of power by either business or government is undesirable, the government does have a legitimate role to play when business abuses power it may have over consumers.

William King (1969) adopted a different fundamental concept of political analysis – systems analysis – to examine how problems are solved at the border between public and private enterprise. King argues that systems analysis is a valuable tool for marketers as well as government, and should be applied "in as large a context as is meaningful and feasible" (p. 85) for a given decision task. This necessarily entails an inter-organizational perspective and a concern with "the overall effectiveness of the system" (p. 88). Despite the challenges of adopting this sort of thinking, King posits that smart businesses can find new sites of competitive advantage if they use systems analysis to identify unmet needs within systems. In the end, it is an interesting and compelling argument for the systems approach, but ultimately misses foundational questions, namely (1) how current 'decision situations' emerged in the first place, and (2) whether radically different allocations of governmental and business resources might better solve the same problems. By focusing on a more narrow, micro-level, King ultimately limits the scope of systems analysis for marketers. As usual, marketing scholarship avoids the central concerns of political economy,

which would have the potential to question the domination of market capitalism within the discipline, and society more broadly.

### *Ethics and politics within the dominant discourses of marketing thought*

All of the core marketing concepts of production, consumption, distribution, supply and exchange are based on economic theory. From this, marketing theory adopts the concepts of consumer sovereignty, market mechanism and laissez-faire originating in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776/1961). Even more narrowly, all the dominant conceptions of marketing depend on the assumptions of a particular utilitarian form of neoclassical economics founded on the Marshallian notion of economic competition, which has dominated Western economic thinking since the nineteenth century. This model contains a set of key assumptions regarding the operation of markets including supply–demand equilibrium; utilitarianism; marginal analysis; market-mediation of dynamics; behavioural rationality; utility/profit maximization; scarcity of resources; and full information. This economic view idealizes the conditions of a 'perfect' market, where consumer choice decides which companies survive and which fail. Because of this, it is assumed that firms are driven to innovate and achieve cost-effective delivery of high quality goods and services at lower prices for the benefit of all. The normative political policy implication is that 'free' economies should be structured to encourage competitive behaviour through consumer choice and to discourage the associated practices of anti-competitive behaviour (Sirgy and Su, 2000).

In their discussion of the dominant managerial school of marketing Easton and Araujo (1994) observe that "occasionally, the supremacy of microeconomics as the core ontology was challenged but with little or no effect on subsequent theorizing" (p. 72). They note that Anderson (1982) puzzled over the question of why the marketing discipline finds itself 'imprisoned' by most of the assumptions of microeconomic theory and retains most of its core ontology. These neoclassical economic assumptions are still reflected in marketing theory in several deep and pervasive respects. The traditional marketing 'concept' proposes that the interests of customers should be the main determinant of *all firms'* activities, which is echoed in any conventional marketing text. Kotler (1972) explains the implication of the marketing concept as being even broader, that *all organizations'* strategies and actions should be customer-focused.

This economics-based marketing concept was operationalized in the twentieth century through the related tools of the marketing mix and market orientation. The use of the word 'tools' is not ironic; the terms toolkit and toolbox are often applied here, reflecting the functionalist ethic of the mainstream marketing discourse. Grönroos (1989) observes that the concept of the marketing mix became dominant and unchallenged very quickly following its entry into marketing textbooks in the 1960s. Along with the four Ps of marketing – product, price, place and promotion – it completely overshadowed previous models and approaches. Grönroos also notes that the mix concept itself was highly context specific to the North American marketing environment with a huge domestic market, a unique media structure and a non-oligopolistic, highly competitive distribution system. Other markets and territories outside the USA are significantly different in terms of market structure, transport, logistics, competition, infrastructure, products, etc. "This marketing model may cover many marketing situations in North America, but its general validity has more been taken for granted than formally proved. In spite of this we have, for instance, no European marketing theory or model geared to European conditions" (Grönroos, 1989: 53).

One way in which the mainstream marketing academy has responded to the North American ethnocentrism of marketing discourse is by absorbing some of the ideas and authors from other

regions. One example is the assimilation of the so-called Nordic School of relationship and service marketing. The Nordic School has developed a different conceptualization and methodology of marketing led by scholars such as Haakan Haakansen, Christian Grönroos and Evert Gummesson. Their ideas and approaches to marketing are predicated on the conceptualization of relationship marketing as first and foremost an organization-wide process. Therefore, the management of marketing activities is envisaged as a holistic process extending far beyond the functional department labelled ‘marketing’ and involving the entire organization. Also importantly, because it is conceptualized in this way as a process, there *are no specified marketing variables* (Gummesson, 2002).

Another development in mainstream marketing theory was Hunt and Morgan’s ‘Comparative Advantage Theory of Competition’ (1995), which attempts to craft an economic theory that explains and legitimates the nature, politics and ethicality of marketing. They start out by questioning the assumptions of classical/neoclassical economics, specifically that of long-term equilibria, homogeneous industry markets and perfect competition. To do so, they adopt the perspective of the individual firm, rather than the entire market – a decidedly political move. The interest of the firm, in their opinion, is to ‘outperform’ the norms of long-run equilibria; to exploit deficits of knowledge held by competitors and one’s own customers; and to differentiate on trivial dimensions such as brand name, in order to seek abnormal profits. Strategies like vertical integration and needless branding are hailed as clever, not anti-competitive and collusive. Needless branding, too, is seen as a smart business move, rather than the creation of an artificial monopoly. In the end, Hunt and Morgan are arguing that the nature and politics of marketing is that of profit-maximizing capitalism. They argue that marketing is guided by the market orientation and that “profit, not just sales, should be the objective” (p. 11) for any market-oriented organization. Firms that are not profit-oriented, such as those that seek to cover costs, function cooperatively or raise money for charity, are consequently not engaging in marketing. By way of a circular argument they go on to say that “economies premised on competing firms are far superior to economies premised on cooperating firms” (p. 2) and even that markets are *never* in equilibrium and activities that produce turmoil in markets have positive benefits because they are “the engine of economic growth” (p. 6). On this basis Hunt and Morgan argue that market-led economies are inherently more democratic, even though power remains concentrated in a few hands. Market capitalism is presented as the only ethical and functional ‘philosophy’ for resource distribution.

Another major development in mainstream marketing theory has also questioned certain aspects of the economic basis of marketing. Vargo and Lusch (2004) recognize the increasing economic predominance of services for marketing on practical and empirical grounds, but because services are not central to economic theory this leads them to question whether the economics basis and concepts from the eighteenth century are sufficient as a theoretical underpinning for marketing in twenty-first century. In previous eras, services were not regarded as the core basis of economies, wealth or markets. Rather, depending on the economic philosophy of the period, it was gold, money, physical goods, agriculture or trade that was central. Vargo and Lusch have made a significant break from past thinking with their proposed shift in general marketing theory from that based on physical goods towards services. Most theory has assumed marketing to be about tangible goods, and services were regarded as the exception. Indeed the services marketing specialist field itself highlighted the ‘unique characteristics of services’ which set them apart from ‘normal’ marketing, i.e. of physical goods. Vargo and Lusch (2004) propose a new ‘service dominant logic’ (SDL) that constitutes a general theory of marketing, applicable to *all* marketing practice which theoretically encompasses everything in advanced society.



As a new contender for dominance in marketing theory, SDL has stimulated much renewed interest in theory development in marketing. The focus of SDL is on marketing as a value co-creation process where service, not goods, is the fundamental basis of exchange and goods are merely 'distribution mechanisms for service provision'. On the face of it, the implicit politics in SDL apparently shifts power from producers to consumers. Marketers can only provide value propositions, embedded in offerings, and their value depends entirely on the experiential evaluation of customers. Two core propositions of SDL state that "value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" and "the customer is always a co-creator of value" (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Of course, this argument is not new. Von Hippel (1978) identified customers as lead innovators for new products and the idea of consumer-as-producer was well established through the notion of the 'prosumer'. However, this idea of the consumer as co-creator of value along with the supplier has been enthusiastically adopted by many leading marketing thinkers. So perhaps mainstream marketing discourse has turned full circle, returning to a modern update, and terminology for the old-style notion of consumer sovereignty. In many respects though little has changed from the early days of the marketing concept, except that the technologies of marketing have become more sophisticated and accordingly academic theorists have developed new concepts and techniques. Like the marketing concept and other early theories none of these more recent variations question the fundamental economic-based ethics of marketing, nor the normative basis of neoliberal market capitalism.

### Counterpoint: critical marketing

Many would regard the first major work from within the marketing discipline that attempted to break with the dominant ideology and practice of academic marketing research to be *Philosophical and Radical Thought in Marketing* (1987). In this book Firat and colleagues critique the discipline's managerial orientation, its emphasis on empirical research at the expense of theory and its overwhelming 'quantitative bias'. However it was Arndt (1985) who first set out a framework for defining alternative philosophical orientations in marketing. Drawing upon Morgan's (1980) organizational studies framework, Arndt analyses and categorizes the different 'paradigms' and associated metaphors in marketing theory, identifying four main paradigms, which contain different assumptions about the nature of the marketing discipline and the study of marketing phenomena. Arndt's major contribution to the debate about marketing's philosophical approach and knowledge was to introduce alternative paradigms, i.e. the logical empiricist, subjective world, socio-political and liberating paradigms. It is only through the application of all four paradigms, he argues, that marketing can develop. In practice this might mean including in the agenda of a critical marketing project questions that explicitly involve research into the conflictual and political character of market exchanges, marketing and consumption, the existential and phenomenological aspects of marketing actors (marketers, consumers, distributors, etc.) and their actions, and the disciplining and constraining effects of marketing practices. Good examples of research that takes these broader issues into account are Hackley (2001) who takes a social constructionist view of marketing and Wooliscroft (2004) who studied how the historical development of theory in marketing was affected by wider socio-political events.

As the above works demonstrate, the implicit ethical underpinnings of marketing theory are rarely revealed, let alone questioned, in marketing literature. Against the backdrop of an ideological crisis in marketing management, however, a growing number of academics find it increasingly difficult to rely on traditional marketing managerial ideology to explain and provide legitimacy for their theory and practice (Marion, 2006). Several critical authors have studied the phenomenon and theory of marketing not as a managerial business function, but viewed

within a wider socio-economic and political context (Brownlie et al., 1999; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). One stream of critique has focused upon the values and ideology underlying the pillars of mainstream marketing thought. Desmond (1998), for instance, traces marketing's ethics from the early twentieth century when the first marketing scholars were educated in the tradition of German historicism and the social dynamics of the free market. Desmond shows that this view of marketing, as satisfying human needs through exchange, is anything but value-free; on the contrary it inherently contains utilitarian values, which, simply put, prescribe the ideal as the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

The notion of consumer freedom and sovereignty itself has been subjected to various critical readings. Hirschman (1993) has studied the language employed in marketing textbooks, which, she argues, are littered with metaphors of war, combat and captivity. Market segments are 'targeted' for 'penetration'. Market share must be 'fought for' and 'won'. Customers must be 'locked-in' lest they 'defect' to the opposition. Thus, consumers are worked upon until they are 'captive'. It was Veblen (1899) who first detailed the modern 'conspicuous consumption' behaviour of the *nouveau riches*, and the manner in which they employed certain types of goods and services as registers of their new social position. The implicit assumption of maximizing consumer choice is that 'more is always better'. Thus, marketing doesn't just lead to more choice, it also arguably leads to *abundance and excess* and the necessary provision of more than consumers need or want (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2009). Other critics of the so-called consumer society include Vance Packard's critical analysis of the methods and effects of the advertising industry in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and J. K. Galbraith's economic analysis of the *Affluent Society* (Galbraith and Crook, 1958). There was also a strong critical element in some of the anthropological studies of consumer-driven society such as Douglas and Isherwood's *World of Goods: Towards Anthropology of Consumption* (1978).

In the UK and Europe attempts to take a critical approach include *Rethinking Marketing: Towards Critical Marketing Accountings* (Brownlie et al., 1999), which aimed to offer "a bigger picture of the social space which marketing occupies and the taken-for-granted ideas which occupy it" (p. 15). This collection of alternative philosophies and methodologies are presented under the portmanteau label 'critical', but these do not always sit comfortably together. Bradshaw and Firat (2007) employ the prefix 'critical' in marketing to signal that the perspective subscribes to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, based on the work of theorists such as Adorno (1991), Marcuse (1964) and Horkheimer (1967). Amongst others, Biehl (2007) shows the potential in applying the 'new aesthetics' based on Frankfurt School Critical Theory which draws on aesthetics and performance research. It provides new insights into concepts such as experiences and atmospheres which are increasingly important for the marketing debate. Other critical marketing authors have raised the issue of what markets *are*. They question whether market boundaries are 'definable' from any single position – far less equilibrium as in neoclassical economic theory. Araujo (2007) rejects the assumptions inherent in most economics and marketing theories where markets appear as 'a natural given', as exemplified by Williamson's (1975) dictum: "In the beginning there were markets" (p. 20). On the contrary, rather than regarding marketing practices as operating within predefined markets, Araujo argues that marketing practices have a *performative role* in helping to create the market and consumption phenomena they describe. Along similar lines, Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) develop a practice-based framework that comprises multiple theoretical influences that can play a part in the shaping of markets.

Wensley (1990) also takes a critical approach by examining the limits to the market exchange analogy. The nature of transactions between provider and user in different exchange contexts are analysed revealing two issues in particular: (1) the degree to which the specific market

transaction is user or supplier specified, and (2) the degree to which the user is regarded as active or passive. Wensley demonstrates that the biggest problem for the market exchange analogy arises with the shift from user to supplier specification, particularly in public sector and professional service contexts. Kilbourne et al. (1997) consider the broad issues of quality of life and sustainable consumption. They argue that micromarketing cannot examine the relationship between these issues *critically* because the essence of the relationship lies in the dominant social paradigm. Only macromarketing can address this relationship effectively by expanding the domain of enquiry to include technological, political and economic benefits and costs of consumption, thus challenging the dominant social paradigm itself. There has also been a backlash against mainstream positivist perspectives in consumer behaviour, especially the information processing view of the consumer, with the development of numerous innovative, interdisciplinary and often critical perspectives rooted in interpretivist, ethnographic and semiotic methods. Some of these critical approaches are encapsulated in the consumer culture theory (CCT) movement (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

One critical concern has centred on whether consumers can and should escape the market or not (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets, 2002; Arnould, 2007), especially under the disciplining and constraining effects of marketing practices, ideology and discourse (Marion, 2006). One problem for authors on either side of this debate is that the question itself forces the authors to adopt a trope of ‘inside versus outside’ the market which carries with it the implicit idea of an emancipated space that is somehow free from the influence of the capitalist marketplace. These authors emphasize consumers’ own attempts to create spaces of autonomy and control in relation to the market through practices of resistance and anti-market activism (Peñaloza and Price, 1993). So, it is from a very wide range of different approaches that critical authors have questioned aspects of marketing from its theoretical underpinnings to its practical outcomes, including the following:<sup>1</sup>

- the ideological premises and underlying assumptions of marketing theory and practice;
- specific marketing activities and practices, e.g. customer databases, product labelling, advertising, loyalty schemes;
- the effects of the marketing system, e.g. social exclusion, material and social waste, creation of false needs and identities, commodity fetishism;
- the ethics, morality, ‘values’ of marketing;
- understanding and knowledge of marketing – models and methods of analysis, role of academics, market research, consulting and marketers’ ‘know-how’;
- validity of marketing ideas and concepts.

The variety of new approaches reflects this recognition that marketing is no longer, if it ever was, a homogeneous universally applicable concept, but, despite attempts to ‘expand disciplinary space’ for critical marketing (Brownlie et al., 2009), it remains a small minority position within the marketing discipline.

### Counterpoint: social marketing

Despite the fact that both mainstream and critical perspectives identify the ethics of marketing as that of market capitalism, there is a third school which focuses on the question of whether or not marketing can be combined with other ethical positions. This camp is known by the moniker of ‘social marketing’. The founders of the field, Kotler and Levy (1969), point out that ‘every organization’ from churches to political parties “performs marketing-like activities

whether or not they are recognized as such” and that “marketing is a pervasive activity that goes considerably beyond the selling of toothpaste, soap and steel” (p. 11). Other social marketing scholars argue that the competitive, capitalist logic of marketing can be used to advance seemingly antithetical ethical positions advocated by environmentalists, feminists, free trade advocates and many others. This premise is not uncontroversial; the majority of marketing scholars rebuff this position and continue to be concerned with the activities of for-profit enterprises. Nevertheless, there remains a dedicated cadre of marketing scholars committed to this broadened concept of marketing, applying it to a wide range of social and non-profit organizations.

In the next section, we consider the ethics and politics of these competing conceptions by way of a case study: an examination of Occupy Wall Street. The case study is grounded in Earley’s autoethnographic research at the original Occupy Wall Street encampment in New York City, as well as her analysis of news reports and ephemera related to the movement. As per the directives of the social marketing literature (e.g. Lee and Kotler, 2011), Occupy Wall Street is analysed as if it were a traditional marketing organization. Along the way, however, it becomes clear that Occupy defined itself as an anti-marketing organization. This raises significant questions about the applicability of marketing tactics to causes that would benefit more from radical transformations of political economy.

### **Analysing Occupy Wall Street as (anti-)marketing**

We have to get rid of pseudo-activity. Like organic food. [It] makes us feel good about ourselves for doing something for the environment, but really, [it’s] about human branding, about marketing.

(Žižek, speech to the Occupiers at Zuccotti Park, 2011)

#### *Occupy as marketing and anti-marketing*

The original call to ‘occupy Wall Street’ came from Adbusters, an activist organization that has long argued that the ‘power’ of marketing can and should be used to address the abuses of marketing. This proposition was put forth by Adbusters’ co-founders Kalle Lasn and Bill Schmalz, both former marketing executives, who decided to cross the aisle and work for ‘the competition’ – activists contesting the legitimacy of globalized capitalism. Adbusters publishes an eponymous magazine and various related ‘subvertisement’ projects. Notable among these is ‘Buy Nothing Day’, held annually on ‘Black Friday’, the highest-volume shopping day in the United States. Though the actual success of Occupy Wall Street can be attributed to local New York activist networks, more than the relatively uninvolved Adbusters organization (Writers for the 99%, 2011), the movement nevertheless was marked by the imprint of its originators. A variety of media groups emerged, such as the Direct Action working group that handled the public relations for the organization, created advertisements that were broadcast on the Fox News channel (Gianatasio, 2011), produced content to be disseminated through online channels and wrote print material for on-site distribution, like *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*.

Of course, the defining strategy of the movement was physical occupation. An army of Occupy Wall Street activists camped day and night at Zuccotti Park, maintaining a ‘retail’ site for the movement and acting as a sales team. The majority of ‘Occupiers’ interviewed in the course of the study argued that this was the most important factor in Occupy’s successes – the open space for discussion, available in a constant location at all times. Taken together, Occupy Wall Street can be characterized as a social marketing organization, whether one uses Kotler and

Levy (1969) or Lee and Kotler (2011). While not *everyone* affiliated with the movement engaged in these activities, a number of activists, especially those inspired by Adbusters, were committed to the use of social marketing tactics to achieve organizational goals.

At the same time, Occupy Wall Street was staunchly anti-marketing. As noted in the *Declaration of the Occupation of New York City*, the movement's major pronouncement of its demands, many of the concerns outlined pertain to the dominance of marketing and capitalism more broadly within American society. Issues featured include the subprime mortgage crisis, abuses of the bailout system, exploitation of labour and discrimination against 'less valuable' workers, 'monopolization' and degradation of the food supply, involving large-scale abuse of animals, privatization of health care, deregulation of markets, the slow-down of environmental changes for the benefit of private contractors (New York General Assembly, 2011). Corporations have harnessed the power of marketing to 'sell' these ideas not only to the general public but, more importantly, to the majority of politicians. Moreover, there was scepticism about the role of marketing even within the movement. One example of a complete anti-marketing position emerged in a discussion of corporate giving to the movement. A member of the general assembly summed up the attitude of the majority of the attendees; 'the difference between donations and sponsorship is that one is about helping [good] another is about branding [bad]'. Another insightful expression of this sentiment can be found in Žižek's speech at the beginning of this section. Here, again, 'marketing' is positioned as antithetical to the work of activists. Indeed, despite news reports to the contrary, there were likely as many Occupiers sceptical of the use of social media and social marketing for achieving the organization's goals. Many within this camp saw the establishment of a well-running socialist polity, with a direct democracy, as the 'true' work of the organization.

How can one activist group hold both pro-marketing and anti-marketing positions at the same time? Ultimately, these two apparently contradictory positions are not mutually exclusive. The organization as a whole was anti-marketing with many activists against 'social marketing'. Some of the individuals might nevertheless be involved in the production of 'good publicity' or marketing materials like flyers. The explanation is that different meanings and senses of marketing are invoked by each of these assertions. When the Adbusters' founders discuss their faith in the efficacy of marketing, or when the Occupiers communicate their beliefs that viral videos, tweets and print advertisements could change public opinion, marketing operates as a politically neutral communications tool, in line with the social marketing literature. Conversely, when Adbusters and Occupy decry the actions of 'marketers' and 'advertisers', they are referring to marketing as an integrated system of strategies for pursuing the goals of profit-oriented organizations. Indeed, the concerns raised in the *Declaration of the Occupation of New York City* indicates that Adbusters' target has broadened from the advertising industry to capitalist economics more broadly, and with it the ethico-politics of mainstream marketing.

### *Analysing the movement: considering the marketing contradiction*

Again, considering Kotler and Levy's (1969) formulation of the marketing concept, Occupy Wall Street can be characterized as a marketing organization, albeit an 'anti-marketing' agency. As seen here, the movement did not condemn the institution of marketing, when it was defined as a set of communication techniques aimed at persuasion. Indeed, many within the movement embraced such marketing tactics, tacitly accepting the idea that 'we are all marketers' at this point in American history. While this argument has been made by scholars that study the use of social media by entrepreneurs (Fischer and Reuber, 2011), and by laypeople (Turow, 2011; Quartirol, 2011), it is interesting to see the same enthusiastic embrace of marketing amongst

some of the Occupiers. In consumer research, anti-marketing movements are explained by Thompson et al. (2006) in their article which studied parodies of Starbucks marketing arguing that such productions are signs that managers have truly lost touch with their consumers; a failure to be marketing-oriented (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990).

In the case of Occupy Wall Street, the target was the entire financial sector, profit-oriented firms, multinational corporations and the military and other organizations that are argued to have seriously compromised the democratic process in the United States. With this in mind, Occupy Wall Street can be described as the *Doppelgänger* of the profit-oriented marketing establishment and indicates a lack of legitimacy for the practice of marketing in the US context, and urges truly market-oriented business to engage in radical changes of values and strategy. Occupiers even had legal justifications for why firms must change their policies and, indeed, legislative action by Occupiers has already put pressure on some businesses attempting to operate ‘as usual’, despite a tremendous recession. One example of this is a constitutional amendment put forth by Dennis Kucinich and Def Jam records label owner Russell Simmons, a prominent backer of the New York encampment (House of Representatives, 2012). Taken together, such pressure on business reflects the fact that marketing is ‘in critical condition’ (as noted by Firat and Tadajewski, 2011).

While this crisis of legitimacy is mainly the domain of critical scholars within our discipline, this is not the case elsewhere. Renowned scholars like geographer David Harvey (2010), anthropologist David Graeber (2011) and even neoclassical Chicago School economist Joseph Stiglitz (2010) contend that the overbearing emphasis on bottom-line profits has led to mass consumer dissatisfaction, as well as producing a catastrophic economic landscape. Put differently, in the words of socio-economist Christian Marazzi (2010), there is nothing ‘wrong’ with capitalism, nor is it ‘broken’; indeed, the issue is that capitalism has worked ‘too well’.

### **Beyond the occupation: theorizing the ethico-politics of marketing**

In the analysis above, we see two incarnations of marketing operating, each with their own ethico-political position – traditional profit-maximizing marketing, which Occupy Wall Street would brutally oppose, and that of welfare-maximizing social marketing, which some activists thought had potential for achieving the organization’s goals. This is also the uneasy truce that persists in the extant marketing literature where some argue strongly that marketing is only a profit-maximizing activity, others contend that it is immanently applicable to the work of non-profits and even activist organizations. At the end of the day, can these two radically different interpretations of marketing really coexist: two perspectives that are simply matters of taste or inclination? The next section begins from these questions, and considers whether social theory may have an answer. Specifically, the political philosophy of Alain Badiou is used in an attempt to synthesize these two perspectives into one theoretical framework.

#### *Elementary political science for marketing*

Drawing again on political science (e.g. Dahl, 1970), power means the ability to influence others or effect change within a political system. Market systems are inherently political systems, because they are organized around structures and hierarchies of power (Carruthers and Babb, 2000; Swedberg, 2003). Marketing can consequently be described as the exercise of power to influence behaviour within a market system. What are the implications of this for existing definitions of marketing? In short, if marketing efficacy is a matter of power, then the most successful marketing organizations are those with most resources and most enviable market positions. This is no surprise

to more profit-oriented theorists of marketing strategy (Day, 1994; Porter, 1991), but it does raise significant problems for the social marketing camp. How can non-profits and political organizations compete within not only the marketplace for ideas, but also the marketplace more generally? From political science we learn that marketing can never be a politically neutral set of communications technologies, but is instead a conscious practice of influence and power.

### *Synthesizing perspectives: Badiou on ethics and politics*

A philosophy worthy of the name . . . is in any case antinomical to the service of goods, inasmuch as it endeavours to be in the service of truths . . . [T]here is no commercial philosophy.

(Badiou, 1988: 341)

Within contemporary philosophy, a perspective has emerged that has the potential to shed light on such questions of ethics and politics – political philosophy. Though political philosophy dates back as far as Plato and Aristotle, and has fallen out of favour within political ‘science’, this subdiscipline has experienced quite a renaissance through the work of scholars such as Alain Badiou as well as Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek. These authors have sought to restore the centrality of questions of ethics and politics within philosophy. The work of Alain Badiou is perhaps best suited for developing new theoretical insights into the ethics of business and marketing.

In contrast to the prevailing popular and theoretical perspectives on ethics, which are always relative and couched in terms of responsibility to an underprivileged ‘Other’ (Critchley, 2013, 1999; Levinas, 1979), Badiou returns to the idea of ethics grounded in truth. For Badiou (1998/2001), truth can be sought in one of four ‘conditions of philosophy’, namely art, love, science or politics. In each domain, truth is that which contradicts structures of power, and would hold true for all, regardless of existing social distinctions. The goal of ‘true’ ethics, then, is to challenge structures of power. Power emerges and finds its strength in ideology<sup>2</sup> – the weaponization of opinion in the name of self-interest. Corrupt ethics are those that serve the interests of power; do not challenge the interests of power; or, quite importantly, debase a truth in the name of self-interest. This occurs when an individual becomes fatigued, losing the ability to be faithful to a truth; when the political subject becomes infatuated with an idea that is not, in fact, true; or when s/he attempts to impose the truth on others, by seeking power. Corrupt ethics, therefore, legitimates repressive and regressive organizational politics. Subjectivity, in turn, is defined by one’s relationship to truths. One is either a subject to a truth (e.g. a political subject), or one is not a subject at all, as one’s opinions and tastes are largely guided by those in power.

If marketing is essentially political, where those in power have the means to perpetuate their interests for their own profit, a Badiouian perspective would be inherently critical to marketing as an institution. Indeed, marketing *qua* economic power would be characterized by inherently corrupt ethics. Building on this, a Badiouian would argue that one cannot engage in ‘anti-marketing marketing’, as the very act of engaging in marketing means that one believes that change can and should occur by market mechanisms, and thereby through the exercise of power. Moreover, both a Badiouian analysis as well as a traditional political analysis of social marketing reveal inherent flaws in its basic tenet, that non-profits can and should compete in a literal ‘marketplace’ for ideas. Building on the work of Habermas (1962/1989), then, contemporary political philosophy argues that the only way ‘true’ political change could occur is through a truly democratic, egalitarian public sphere – one in which demographic differences are

immaterial. Indeed, Badiou believes that the object of ethics should not be to ‘protect’ ‘different’ Others, but to erase difference, or at least the meaning of difference. In conclusion, as seen in the epigraph to this section and as also argued by Rancière (1992/2007) and Žižek (2009), Badiou would contend that true citizenship is antithetical to the ‘consumer citizenship’ proffered by the market.

## Discussion: the cultural politics of marketing

The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

(Lorde, 1984: 110)

Throughout this chapter, we have considered the different definitions of marketing that have emerged over time and the ethico-political assumptions inherent therein. As one would expect from the work of critical marketers, we found that the majority of the mainstream marketing literature is grounded in the ethico-political assumptions of competitive, neoliberal market capitalism. Nevertheless, there is one point of divergence in the marketing literature – that which comes from ‘broadened’ and ‘social’ conceptions of marketing. The subdiscipline of social marketing argues that marketing is of use to non-profits and activist organizations. Moreover, it *should* be used by non-profits and activist organizations.

Using the case of Occupy Wall Street, we explored how these definitions have been adopted and are deployed in a real-world context. Again, these two perspectives operate in tandem; one could be ‘anti-marketing’, but nevertheless use marketing tactics to attack the institution of marketing. With recourse to the political theory literature, we sought to interrogate this cosy coexistence – whether one could be an ‘anti-marketing marketer’. In the terms used by political theory, traditional marketing can be defined in terms of the unabashed, conscious exercise of power. Social marketing, in turn, is defined as traditional marketing that seeks to contest these structures of power. Our analysis reveals an inherent contradiction in the social marketing literature: one cannot use power to contest power. This is brought into particularly stark contrast by way of a Badiouian analysis. Here, ethics are defined in terms of one’s relationship to power, and one cannot both hold it and contest it at the same time. As marketing is a conscious exercise of power, operating – in the words of one of its leading *proponents* – ‘between coercion and brainwashing’ (Kotler, 1972: 49), there is no such thing as a ‘politically neutral’ marketing technology. Sustainable social change can only come through the disavowal of power and its inherent potential for abuse, rather than a simple transfer of power.

Considering the history of marketing, it is clear that the institution emerged as a way for firms to increase the purview of their activities, in order to create economies of scale and maximize returns. As such, it is a conscious exercise of power, within the domain of the capitalist world economy. Over time, this ethico-political position has spread from the lords of industry to the population at large. With the emergence of ‘consumer citizenship’, the substitution of marketing for politics is increasingly accepted by ‘consumer-citizens’ and growing numbers of activists (Žižek, 2009; Badiou, 1998/2001; Rancière, 1992/2007; Banet-Weiser, 2007). This importation of the marketing concept into the domain of political deliberation can be largely attributable to the work of the social marketing camp, which unwittingly wedded the pro-capitalist ideology of marketing to socialist and anti-capitalist causes.

Political analysis reveals that this is a battle that can never be won, as the power of capital and capitalists is ever-expanding (Harvey, 2005, 2003). Activists, non-profits, governments and others who engage in ‘social marketing’ can never acquire the type of power (namely capital)



that their adversaries in the business world can. For example, a political analysis of Occupy Wall Street would reveal that the organization would be unlikely to achieve its goals by marketing means. As noted in the analysis, the movement's adversary was all of consumer culture – an adversary with the might of the entire for-profit sector behind it. Indeed, the closure of the Occupy Wall Street camp in New York was largely orchestrated by firms that felt threatened by the activists' protests (Wolf, 2012). All of the activists' efforts, marketing-inspired and otherwise, were no match for the superior might of a small handful of firms. In the end, the idea of democracy occurring in the 'marketplace of ideas' is bankrupt, when one considers the disproportionate influence these firms hold in this sphere, as well as in the formal halls of government.

Both the case study and theoretical arguments presented here raise serious questions about whether marketing logic can have liberatory potential. Given that marketing relies on the deployment of power, a Badiouian ethical analysis would argue that it is inherently oppressive. Furthermore, traditional political analysis and experience suggests that contesting power by harnessing power is unlikely to ever succeed. Taking these considerations together, the final assessment is perhaps best expressed through the words of Audre Lorde at the beginning of this section: we know now that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1984).

## Notes

- 1 For an overview of critical marketing topics and methods see Brownlie et al., 1999; Saren et al., 2007.
- 2 Though there are many definitions of ideology (Eagleton, 2007), Badiou eschews the apolitical notion of ideology (e.g. 'the belief system of a culture') in favour of a definition that emphasizes the role of power in creating ideology and negatively impacting culture. Consequently, Badiou's work can be seen as a return to the critique of ideology that has been a hallmark of critical theory, as the exercise of power is inherently ideological.

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