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# Critical marketing studies: logical empiricism, ‘critical performativity’ and marketing practice

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**Abstract.** According to recent statements by prominent Critical Marketing scholars, there remains a problem of how to clarify this ambiguous label for interested colleagues. Beyond the usual gestures to paradigmatic pluralism, epistemological reflexivity and ontological denaturalization (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008; Whittle and Spicer, 2008), I argue that Critical Marketing Studies possesses similar characteristics to the vein of thought promoted by the founding members of the Vienna Circle. Critical Marketing and logical empiricism, I suggest, are not the diametrical opposites that we might otherwise suppose. Subsequently I claim that Critical Marketing Studies needs to engage with marketing actors and this requires a different relationship between Critical scholars and practitioners than may have been the case previously. Finally, I provide an alternative way of thinking about theory production in marketing. **Key Words** ● critical marketing ● critical marketing studies ● logical empiricism ● marketing management ● marketing practice ● marketing theory

## Introduction

When we turn to the marketing literature, it is clear that Critical Marketing Studies is an increasingly popular subject. But what confronts and confounds many is the ambiguity surrounding the term itself: what do we mean when we talk about Critical Marketing Studies? In this research note I provide some much needed clarification on this point. This said, I go beyond present debates that rehearse a listing of the paradigms associated with Critical Marketing. In contrast to prominent Critical scholars (e.g. Arndt, 1985; Burton, 2001; Saren et al., 2007; Shankar, 2009), I argue that logical empiricism can play a role in Critical Marketing Studies. Supplementing this, Critical Marketing Studies should, if it takes seriously its own



axiological principles, engage with practitioners in a 'critically performative' sense (Spicer et al., 2009). Marketing theory, I conclude, can be Critical and 'experimental'.<sup>1</sup>

## Critical marketing studies and logical empiricism

Various scholars argue that theory production in marketing is 'dominated' by a variant of logical empiricism (e.g. Arndt, 1985). As a means of encouraging a critical reflexivity, alternative paradigms have been suggested that should supplement this worldview, including such obviously 'critical perspectives' as feminism, critical theory, post-structuralism and post-colonialism to name a few (Burton, 2001; Saren, 2007). If there is one thing that Critical Marketing is not, scholars have said recently, it is not logical empiricist or 'positivistic' in orientation (e.g. Shankar, 2009: 690–91). Critical Marketing is non-positivistic in the sense that it does not try to make a case for the objectivity of its analyses.

Taking this point further, Critical commentators encourage us to appreciate that all ways of thinking about marketing theory and practice are political. This is true of logical empiricist perspectives and explicitly Critical accounts (Benton, 1985; cf. Scott, 2007). As has been argued elsewhere, the promotion of logical empiricism in marketing by the Ford Foundation was motivated by the apparent ideological neutrality of this way of seeking knowledge. Supporting this scientific style was a means of assuaging McCarthyite elements in the US government (Tadajewski, 2006a). Such a move is political in that it publicly cohered to the American scientific–technocratic vision of the world that served as a counterpoint to Russian ideological bias, and was part of a larger programme initiated by the American government to influence former colonies to adopt the economic and political values being promoted by the US (Tadajewski, 2009).

While highlighting the conjunction of logical empiricism and US politics in this way will undoubtedly annoy those in the 'mainstream' of marketing thought and raise a cheer from Critical Marketers, this is not my intention. Although logical empiricism with its apparent 'view from nowhere', absence of ethical engagement and concern (Bauman, 1991; Wicks and Freeman, 1998) and claims to objectivity would appear to be remarkably distant from the Critical Marketing project, I want to argue otherwise, proposing that there is more shared ground between the two 'camps' than may currently be appreciated. Our extant understanding of logical empiricism as being distanced from ethical or political concerns is historically inaccurate and this is where we can bring Critical Marketing and logical empiricist scholars together. Logical empiricism *was* a political project, in the Critical sense, in its early history. It was the translation of logical empiricism in America that leaves us with a distorted image of this way of thinking, so that we imagine it to be ostensibly apolitical, value free and so forth, when it was never wholly intended as such.

For example, a number of the founding fathers of the logical empiricist movement, such as Otto Neurath, were socialist in political orientation (Reisch, 1994,

1997). Neurath was politically active (Kallen, 1946) and ethically minded (Uebel, 2004). His value system, as well as that of other logical empiricist colleagues, supported 'critical reflection' on axiological values (Feigl, 2004 [1955]), was founded upon a 'sceptic pluralism' (Neurath, 1946) and reflexivity (O'Neill and Uebel, 2004; Uebel, 2004) that chimes with Critical Marketing. Furthermore, moral judgments and claims to knowledge were 'conditional' on a given 'human-social situation' (Feigl, 2004 [1955]). These scientific values were the basis for intersubjective debate and discussion, which has latterly been depicted as consistent with a kind of Habermasian communicative action (Ibarra and Morman, 2003; Richardson, 2009; Uebel, 2004). In addition, Neurath registers the underdetermination of theory by empirical evidence as permitting 'conditional' political interests to inflect science (Hands, 2005; Ibarra and Morman, 2003; Uebel, 2004, 2005). Summarizing the orientation of the early logical empiricists, Reisch (1998: 342) explains what motivates them:

How and to what extent philosophy of science should engage culture and politics were real questions for the founders of professional philosophy of science, namely European logical empiricists and their early converts in America. It was only in the late 1950s that philosophy of science . . . adopted an explicitly politically-neutral posture . . . Before this time, however, thinkers as different as Otto Neurath and the neo-pragmatist Charles Morris hoped that their efforts as philosophers and editors of logical empiricism's flagship, *The International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, would have real political and social effects.

Much like the work of contemporary Critical Marketing academics (e.g. Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Ozanne and Murray, 1995; Ozanne et al., 2005) that seeks to highlight the educational preconditions that structure access to needed marketplace resources, and thereby constrain life-choices and experiences, commensurate concerns underpin the work of the Vienna Circle (e.g. Uebel, 2004: 44, 2005: 757), as represented vividly in Neurath's affiliation with the adult education movement and his role in developing a 'visual dictionary' that conveyed important economic information to 'non-literate people' (see Reisch, 1994: 154; Uebel, 2004: 50). Uebel's remarks are apposite here:

All members of the Vienna Circle supported its emblematic project of *Volksbildung* (literally 'people's education') in the service of something like the democratization of society. They understood adult education as a form of cognitive empowerment that would enable the population to participate more discriminatingly and thus more fully in culture and politics. Some of the members of the Vienna Circle . . . were more or less actively involved in socialist politics . . . They are Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Hans Hahn and Phillip Frank. (Uebel, 2005: 755)

It would appear then, on the face of the assumptions undergirding the work of the Vienna Circle and logical empiricist movement, that there is no *prima facie* reason to conclude that Critical Marketing Studies and logical empiricism are politically irreconcilable. Since I have gestured to the political performativity of the Vienna Circle and their desire to contribute to social change, it is reasonable to turn to the issue of performativity and Critical Marketing to see whether we can avoid Critical Marketing Studies being accused of the anti-performative bias incorrectly levelled

at Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Willmott, 2006). First, however, we need to distinguish conventional 'performativity' from what has been termed 'critical performativity' (Spicer et al., 2009).

## Performativity and critical performativity

Frequently associated with Critical Marketing and CMS more generally are commitments to paradigmatic and methodological pluralism, reflexivity and ontological denaturalization (Brownlie, 2006; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Saren et al., 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008; Whittle and Spicer, 2008). The main issue that has garnered the most interest from observers is the CMS critique of 'mainstream' scholarship as non-critical in that it shies away from questioning the status quo.

Fournier and Grey (2000) say that in differentiating 'Critical' from 'mainstream' theory and research we must examine the performative 'intent' driving it. By performative they mean that it is undertaken and justified according to a 'means-ends calculus' (Fournier and Grey, 2000). 'Mainstream' research, on their reading, aims to make management more efficient, more effective. Using this notion of performativity as our prism, mainstream marketing theory and practice can be depicted as concerned initially with 'understanding' (Tadajewski, 2006b), then 'educating' (Applbaum, 2000, 2009a), manipulating (Dickinson et al., 1986) or 'stimulating' the consumer (Applbaum, 2009b). This is done in an effort to influence and control consumer behaviour more effectively (Applbaum, 2009b; Hackley, 2002).

By contrast, Critical Marketing approaches appear to refuse this notion of performativity. This is not to say that Critical Marketing can be identified by its 'anti-performative' intent (cf. Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). At a broad level, such approaches prefer to adopt what has recently been called a 'critical performative' stance which 'involves . . . [an] active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses' (Spicer et al., 2009: 538). In engaging in this practical endeavour, scholars have approached critiquing the performative and managerialist emphasis of marketing in a variety of ways. For example consistent with the 'nay saying' of Critical Theory (Lowenthal, 1987), they try to destabilize the taken-for-granted nature of key marketing concepts. From this perspective, marketing theory and practice is gendered, exclusionary and used in sometimes problematic ways (Applbaum, 2009b; Bristol and Fischer, 1993; Burton, 2002, 2009; Jack, 2008; Maclaran et al., 2009). As such, 'the social, moral and political imperatives that underpin many of our theories, models, and practices' need to be brought to critical consciousness (Catterall et al., 2002).

That marketing theory and practice are subject to critique in this way should not be interpreted as a proposal for Critical Marketing Studies to distance itself from marketing actors. As Adler argues in another context,

critique . . . [is] most effective when it benefits from direct engagement . . . Engagement with the practice of [marketing] management means studying it from close up, not just from our office armchairs; it means working shoulder-to-shoulder with those struggling against oppres-

sion and exploitation . . . it may also mean working with [marketing] managers who are trying to find a better way. (Adler, 2008: 926)

This is one avenue through which Critical Marketing Studies can be ‘relevant’ – relevant for society first and foremost. Clearly this point is pregnant with nuance that I cannot hope to flesh out. To be relevant, nevertheless, implies that we *also* attend to other groups in society affected by marketing such as the poor, old, young, ill, disenfranchised others, whose views are rarely heard by those in positions of power (cf. Applbaum, 2009b; Maclaran et al., 2009; Thompson, 1995).

But let us pause for a moment on the issue of marketing practice. If values such as reflexivity, ontological denaturalization and intellectual pluralism are the guiding virtues of Critical Marketing Studies, then they should encourage researchers to cultivate an openness to and tolerance of all stakeholders, marketing practitioners included. This is not always the reality. Critical perspectives often run the risk of presenting caricatures of practice (Schudson, 1981; Spicer et al., 2009), if they engage with it at all. All the same, Critical Marketing Studies, on its own tenets, cannot justify disengaging from marketing practice. It can be ‘critical *and* engaged’ (Bridgman, 2007: 429, emphasis in original). Broadening Adler’s conception of engagement, this means speaking to ‘constituencies outside of the university, through relationships with practitioners, membership of committees or advisory groups related to public policy, involvement with think tanks and political parties and appearances in the media’ (Bridgman, 2007: 426).

After all, there is no reason, Bridgman opines, why ‘relevance’ should necessarily be equated with the ‘pursuit of a narrow commercialization agenda where the business school becomes the “servant” of industry, propagating a strictly managerialist view of the world’ (Bridgman, 2007: 437). Still, it *is* important, he concludes, that ‘engagement’ with external constituents – whoever they may be – does take place (see Fulop, 2002).

## Engaging with practice

Obviously, changing the world economic system is never going to be easy (Nason, 2008). It is this which partly structures contemporary marketing practice and helps pervert marketing activities along lines that contribute to gross domestic product, but fail miserably to add to our quality of life (Firat and Tadajewski, 2009). Even so, social change has to begin somewhere (Benton, 1985; Connolly and Prothero, 2003; Firat and Vicdan, 2008). One way this can be ignited is via empirical studies with marketing managers, consumers and civil society groups. Since, as Axel Honneth, a contemporary critical theorist asserts, ‘empirical research done in an accurate way has, whether we want it [to] or not, a certain consciousness-raising effect’ (Honneth in Petersen and Willig, 2002: 269).

Developing a related argument, Voronov (2008) puts forward the proposition that it is perfectly reasonable for Critically minded academics to engage in theoretical and practically led interventions that aspire to facilitate ‘micro-emancipations’

(Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Spicer et al., 2009: 553; Willmott, 2006). In other words, as Willmott puts it,

Short of dictating to managers what they should do . . . one important task for members of the . . . CMS movement is to develop alternative frameworks and vocabularies for making sense of the complexities and contradictions of [the] contemporary work organization, and thereby facilitate some measure of micro-emancipation from the hegemony of mainstream practice. (Willmott, 2006: 34)

In line with this proposal, Critical academics could work with traditional for-profit organizations (Appelbaum, 2009b; Knights, 2009; Murray and Ozanne, 1991), as well as non-profit, non-governmental bodies and activist groups (Burton, 2009; Tadajewski, 2010; Voronov, 2008). The end result will probably not reflect a radical rethinking of society, but instead be restricted to the modification of 'practice to reduce its harmful social effects' (Voronov, 2008: 943). In spite of this, such activities can lead to wider social change in a manner akin to Veblen's 'utopian realism'. Veblen, we should recall, was willing to challenge the status quo and engaged in projects aligned with influential groups provided that his engagement was largely on his 'own terms' (Tilman, 1973: 163). Yet Veblen held out hope that he could play a role in encouraging 'sweeping changes in the institutional fabric' (Tilman, 1973: 163; cf. Maclaran et al., 2009).

Veblen, put simply, valued his intellectual independence; as should Critical Marketers (Knights, 2009). Indeed, our intellectual and financial freedom, courtesy of the institutional locations we occupy, provide us with the space to mount a critique of inequitable social and marketplace relations (Grey and Willmott, 2002; Knights, 2009). This type of intellectual orientation takes us back to the Critical foci of the German Historical School who co-founded the marketing discipline (Jones and Monieson, 1990).

Provided that we remain alert to the issue of co-optation, engagement with marketing practice(s) appears important for Critical Marketing Studies (cf. Brownlie et al., 2007: 401–2). Offering us some purchase on the form that these activities can take via his own involvement with business, Knights (2009) recalls his work with the Financial Services Forum, a body that was sponsored by a variety of actors, both commercial and non-profit. In this forum, he explains,

we have sought to lead debate with our members, but also sought to engage them in certain forms of coproduction where academics and managers together brainstorm problems prior to research . . . While frequently the Forum has been under pressure to provide knowledge of a management consultancy nature, we have not only resisted this, but also have endeavoured to retain a critical edge to our research and workshops. (Knights, 2009: 542)

Naturally enough, Knights (2009) realizes that we should be wary of producing managerially 'relevant' outputs in response to the demands of sponsors. The 'danger' of the relevance criterion, as Knights sees it, is that we may be 'tempted to subordinate our academic independence in exchange for the prospect of securing increased income and status through working *for* rather than merely *with* business' (Knights, 2009: 539–40, emphases in original). We should work with practitioners, Knights claims, but not accept the performative goals likely to be driving prac-

tioners (i.e. profit motives; see Applbaum (2009b: 192, n. 4) and Nason (2008: 424)). With these caveats in mind, Knights describes a funded project consistent with theoretical topics explored by Critical Marketing scholars (e.g. Firat, 1985, 1987):

Another project criticized market research as poorly theorized and, therefore, misplaced because it assumed that consumers had 'needs' that companies simply had to satisfy through their products. By pointing out that such 'needs' are socially constructed, the Forum made it clear that corporations do not just respond to, but also create the demands of their customers, and this goes some way to explaining their huge advertising budgets. (Knights, 2009: 542)

Engagement<sup>3</sup> with practice is, on this interpretation, not necessarily problematic provided that scholars appreciate the potentially unequal power relations that exist between researcher and sponsor (Applbaum, 2009b; O'Shaughnessy, 1996). This assumption that engagement is practicable feeds into the next point: that we need to modify the way we think about and approach engagement and theory production.

## Thinking differently about engagement and theory production

So, to reaffirm a point made above, a sceptical, intellectually flexible posture is a desirable feature of Critical scholarship. More than this, the kind of Critical Marketing Studies that contemporary commentators are moving toward goes beyond this traditional Critical stance and is 'experimental' (Gibson-Graham, 2008) *and* Critical (see also Maclaran et al., 2009; Spicer et al., 2009; Tadajewski, 2010). Rather than assuming that the impact of marketing on society is always detrimental or that marketing managers are morally 'myopic' or 'mute' (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004), viewing the activities of marketing actors from an 'experimental' perspective means that our 'research is characterized by an interest in learning rather than judging' when we first approach our research endeavours<sup>4</sup> (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 628).

According to some, the problem that may arise is that Critical academics are believed to be almost antagonistic to practitioner opinion (Elliott and Reynolds, 2002; Stookey, 2008). Thus where Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2006) frame what they call 'experiential reflexivity' as involving 'emphasis on [the] co-creation of meaning through intimate research in which experiences are shared and no attempt is made to "bracket" the researchers own lived experience' (2006: 232), there is always the potential for a priori views to impact negatively on the research relationship, with the Critical academic adopting a morally 'righteous' attitude (Catterall et al., 1999; Spicer et al., 2009; Stookey, 2008; Voronov, 2008).

Instead of self-righteousness, Spicer et al. (2009: 541, 545) aver that the ethical relation between Critical academics and practitioners should be based on mutual 'respect'. This is in keeping with a feminist approach to consumer research 'which emphasises identification, trust and empathy, which brings out a relationship between the researcher and researched based on cooperation and collaboration' (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2006: 229). From my perspective, an 'experimental'

(Gibson-Graham, 2008) view of research practice involves being willing to learn from marketing actors how they perceive their role in society, exploring the 'multiple rationalities' that guide their activities (Hotho and Pollard, 2007). Implicit here is the idea that we register where practitioners' self-understanding does and does not conform to the stereotypical images found in certain strands of the Critical literature, thereby pluralizing our understanding of what constitutes marketing action (Tadajewski, 2010). To use the words of Gibson-Graham (2008: 618), this demands 'a different orientation to theory':

What if we were to accept that the goal of theory is not [necessarily] to extend new knowledge by confirming what we already know, that the world is a place of domination and oppression? What if we asked theory instead to help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility. (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 619)

In methodological terms, beyond historically and theoretically informed empirical research based on observational methods (Fromm, 2006 [1962]) or interviews (Petersen and Willig, 2002), researchers have indicated a role for 'participatory action research' in effecting social change (Grey, 2004; Ozanne and Saatcioglu, 2008; Voronov, 2008, 2009). For Brewis and Wray-Bliss (2008), this variant of action research reduces the distance between the researcher and the co-participant. Such an approach is, Voronov adds, 'ideologically compatible with CMS because of its attention to the issues of oppression and exclusion, power and reflexivity' (Voronov, 2008: 942–3). To sum up, these are just a few of the ways in which we can reflect on the role of marketing in society, with a view to sketching out the spaces of 'freedom and possibility' that Gibson-Graham (2008) references.

## Conclusion

In this research note, I have tried to clarify and work through the topic of Critical Marketing Studies. Importantly, far from uncritically assuming that Critical Marketing Studies, logical empiricism and marketing practice are domains destined to operate from positions demarcated by a values incommensurability (Tadajewski, 2008), I used a broadly construed Critical perspective guided by appropriate historical study, intellectual pluralism and an openness to alternative positions, to think about how these domains can be brought into constructive discourse.

## Notes

1. The term 'experimental' is derived from the work of the Critical Geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham and their efforts to critically interrogate the role people play in a society currently 'performed' and measured by a restricted range of economic theories. I see their efforts as a continuation of the work undertaken by first generation Critical Theorists, especially Erich Fromm in his *The Sane Society* (2005 [1956]). Critical Management Studies (e.g. Spicer et al., 2009; Styhre, 2008) and Critical Marketing Studies (Maclaran et al., 2009) all offer similar 'affirmative', 'performative' in the Butlerian sense, and 'critically performative' (Spicer et al., 2009) positions

that chime with those found in this research note. In a related publication, I outline a history of Critical Marketing Studies that offers a number of other ways in which Critical Marketing Studies can be 'affirmative' via the work of Fromm (Tadajewski, 2010). Given the nature of a research note, I do not explain terms such as logical empiricism, positivism, and so on. Glossaries (e.g. Kavanagh, 1994) or introductions to the respective paradigms are available elsewhere if required (e.g. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Murray and Ozanne, 1994). I would add that the arguments I present are broad-brush in scope, intended to stimulate further debate and refinement among scholars.

2. Corporations also obviously attempt to structure the regulatory market by influencing government officials and related influential figures and bodies (Applbaum, 2009b).
3. For an alternative form of practical engagement, see Schor (2007).
4. In case of any confusion, I should add that Drumwright and Murphy (2004) approach their research in an open, carefully structured manner. I am not trying to suggest their research is problematic.

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