Journal of Macromarketing
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Journal of Macromarketing 2011 31: 8 originally published online 16 August 2010
DOI: 10.1177/0276146710378168

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jmk.sagepub.com/content/31/1/8

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Macromarketing Society

Journal of Macromarketing
31(1) 8-18

DOI: 10.1177/027614671037816 8
http://jmk.sagepub.com
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The Consumer as "Voter," "Judge," and "Jury": Historical Origins and Political Consequences of a Marketing Myth

Stefan Schwarzkopf[1]

Abstract

This article discusses the origins of the idea that a consumer's choice is equivalent to a citizen's vote or a juror's verdict and that markets therefore resemble the political process of a democracy. The idea of the consumer as sovereign driver of the marketplace emerged during the enlightenment. It was, however, the development of market research methods during the 1930s and 1940s, which provided the crucial backdrop for the sudden rise to prominence of an idea that assumes that consumers dictate what is produced through their "votes," that is, daily choices. Innovations in the measurement of consumer preferences, such as consumer juries, panel surveys, and the program analyzer technique, provided the final touch of scientific credibility to this idea. An understanding of the historical origins and political–philosophical implications of the equation of consumer markets and democracies is of importance for the study of macromarketing because it helped legitimize specific industries that today have come under closer scrutiny for their potentially detrimental impact on the social welfare of consumers, such as the advertising and the entertainment industries. This equation also provided—and still provides—a theoretical underpinning for the marketing concept as a marketing management philosophy.

Keywords

marketing history, marketing concept, market research, democracy, consumer sovereignty

The Contested Nature of the Market as Governance Structure

The pervasiveness of marketing practices in Western societies rests on a number of powerful social and political mythologies that helped normalize the reshaping of these societies along the lines of market structures that favor corporate interests over those of the public and civil society. One of these myths that "mobilized" (Miller and Rose 1997) and redefined people as consumers is the imagination of the marketplace as a "democracy of goods" and a "consumer democracy" in which consumer choices act as "votes" that decide over the fate of products and companies. In this vision, consumer advertising is presented as "information" (Nelson 1974; Stigler 1961) and the consumer appears as a sovereign decision maker to whom the market ultimately has to answer.

This myth of the consumer as independent and sovereign "voter" and the market as a form of democracy has its origins in the interwar battles over the legitimacy of marketing as a social technique and the legitimacy of the free market as an alternative form of social and political governance (Polanyi 1944, 257-68). In particular, the scientification of market research tools through consumer interviews, panel surveys, consumer juries, program analyzer techniques, and product testing panels, which emerged during that period helped legitimize marketing practices (Laird 1998; Strasser 1989, 148-59). With the help of graphs, charts, and statistics, advertising and market research companies projected the marketplace as the new agora of a consumer democracy and visualized mass consumer opinion as independent jury and skeptical arbiter.

Among the newly available research tools, it was the consumer jury that symbolically aligned most closely the voting of citizens and the verdicts of citizen–jurors with the act of consumer choice. Just as citizen–jurors in fair and democratic judicial processes delivered unbiased verdicts based on evidence, so came the market research process to be understood as a way for consumers to deliver a verdict over products and services offered to the market. The claim that consumer choices resembled the verdicts of a jury helped rhetorically rebalance the bargaining power disparity between consumers and producers: like in a democracy, producers had to offer themselves up

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to the shrewd judgment of consumers, whose power of choice allegedly put them in the driving seat of a free market economy. Advertising agencies and market researchers could thus symbolically proffer themselves as the vanguard of an ideal market democracy that achieved a rational balance between the needs of consumers, workers, and producers, thus forestalling the threat of reordering this power balance through government or revolutionary action.

Historical Origins of a Marketing Myth

As Lears (1994), Donohue (2003), and McGovern (2006) have argued, the origins of the consumer–citizen equation are to be found in the trans-Atlantic transformation between 1890 and 1940 of liberal economic and political thought, which increasingly began to stress the role of consumers and of consumption in the political economy of Western democracies. Coinciding with this transformation was the rise of new market research methods in Europe and in the United States, which sought to go beyond the mere measurement of aggregate consumer expenditure in often broadly defined product categories and instead allowed consumers to develop a voice and express opinions with regard to their daily choices and attitudes toward specific brands. The coming together of new consumer theories that sought to move beyond marginalist analysis (Kyrk 1923; Patten 1889, 1907; Veblen 1899) and increasing demand for consumer research sparked a number of innovations in Euro-American marketing and advertising practices.

During the mid- and late-1930s, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert K. Merton, and Ernest Dichter developed the focus group method of consumer analysis (Bartels 1952, 108-24; Converse 1987, 133-44, 267-304; Fullerton 2007; Kassarjian 1994; Lazarsfeld 1935, 1937; Lazarsfeld and Fiske 1938; Lunt and Livingstone 1993; Merton 1987, 550-66; Merton, Fiske, and Kendall 1956; Moran 2008; Morrison 1998, 63-143; Oberschall 1978; Platt 1996, 11-33; Schwarzkopf and Gries 2010). In these groups, consumers answered open-ended questions, were guided through unstructured interviews, and discussed problems in a more explorative way. These methods symbolically afforded consumers an influential voice and invited comparisons between the processes of democratic competition and deliberation (i.e., voting) and the act of consumer choice. For Lazarsfeld and his assistant Marjorie Fiske, it was clear that the development of democracy, that is, "the increased political interest all over the country" and the "increased use of market research in business" went hand in hand and that the consumer and voter panels, which were created throughout American from the mid-1930s benefited both the political process and the market competitiveness of firms (Lazarsfeld and Fiske 1938, 596). Similarly, the opinion pollsters George Gallup and Elmo Roper told Americans that the "representative" and "democratic" nature of their polling techniques increased the chance of political participation of ordinary people who felt ignored in the political process (Robinson 1999, 38-41; critical: Beniger 1983). Roper, in a speech in 1942, linked the idea of the survey as a modern tool of democracy to the role of consumer and marketing researchers, whose investigations made the market more responsive to the needs of ordinary people. Consumer research allowed the public to say to the manufacturer, "You'll make what we want, in the shape we want, in the colour we want, and sell it at the price we want to pay or else we will exercise our inalienable right to refuse to buy your goods" (Roper 1942).

The emergence of these market research innovations coincided with the popularization of the Austrian School of Economics in Britain and the United States and the Austrians' thought on the relationship between markets and democracies. Joseph Schumpeter, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich August von Hayek argued that the institutional structure of democracies made them very much like markets (Hoover 2003, 69-80). Schumpeter, today widely recognized as having shared the main tenets of the Austrian School of Economics (Boettke 1994; Simpson 1983; more critical is Langlois 1985), espoused a theory of democracy, which rejected the idea that democracy was a process by which the electorate identified the common good that was then carried out for them by elected politicians. In his view, people's ignorance and superficiality put them in danger of being manipulated by demagogues, who set the agenda. This made a "rule by the people for the people" concept both unlikely and undesirable. Instead, he advocated a minimalist model of democracy, which stressed the discovery function of democratic competition. This model presented democracy as a mechanism for competition between leaders and party's policy programs, much like a market structure. Periodical votes by the electorate represented the necessary symbolic affirmation of a government's legitimacy and kept it accountable (Schumpeter 1942/2008, 269-302). It was in explicit recognition of this symbolic understanding of the relationship between democracy and market competition, which now showcased consumers as the true, but often ignored and short-changed, trustees of democracy and sovereigns of economic life, that the consumer psychologist George Katona developed the "Consumer Sentiment Index" during the 1940s (Cohen 2004, 298-309; Horowitz 1998; Katona 1960). Katona's consumer confidence index was devised to give a more accurate indication of the future course of the national economy than could be gauged from producers' expressed intention to invest in production capacity.

Unsurprisingly, the advertising industries both in the United States and in the Europe were very keen on developing and exploiting the symbolic equation between mass consumers and a democratic electorate or a jury as it allowed advertisers to present themselves as a force that made the market more responsive to consumer needs and, through market research, as a mechanism that gave consumers the chance to hold manufacturers to account. The rhetoric of advertising as the *via regis* to democratized, classless abundance for all permeated the advertising industry's attempts at legitimizing itself in the eyes of consumers during the interwar period. This rhetoric provided a way of balancing the opportunities of capitalist growth and the necessity of capitalism's commitment to democracy without necessarily endorsing a planned economy

or a powerful welfare state. It also promised to tame capitalism "from below," by handing over the responsibility for controlling the destructive insatiability of human desires to consumers.

The targets of this rhetoric can be split up into two major groups. First, inviting comparisons between the advertising process and political democracy was part and parcel of the collective project of professionalization, which was pursued by the advertising industry from the late nineteenth century (Marchand 1986, 25-9, 48-51; Schwarzkopf 2008, 1-28). As an industry, advertising was constantly under pressure to justify its existence (Pope 1973, 313-36). Naturally, framing the industry within the terminology of democracy, choice, advocacy, citizenship, and representation helped assuage the anguish and professional status anxieties of advertising practitioners. Yet, second, this rhetoric served some far more tangible aims, too. Practitioners early on realized that those who criticized persuasive and aggressive advertising did often not attack "advertising as such, but the capitalist system" as a whole (Borden 1944, 6). Bringing to life the apparent similarities between consumer choice and the voting process helped enlist for the cause of advertising the support of those who benefited from the political–economic status quo, that is, American political and business elites and other groups with the power to shape public opinion.

For the equation between consumers and citizens to work and to permeate public discourse, industrial pressure groups with a vested interest in the success of these business propaganda tropes had to come in and lend authority to the claim that markets were essentially the equivalent of a consumers' democracy. The 1920s and 1930s in particular saw a burgeoning of business propaganda that connected the advertising and market research industries with the aims of democracy (Bird 1999; McGovern 2006; Stole 2006). In 1920, the Barton, Durstine and Osborne agency told business audiences that "The product of advertising is something … powerful and commanding—it is public opinion; and in a democracy, public opinion is the uncrowned king. It is the advertising agency's business to write the speeches from the throne of that king" (Marchand 1986, 31). The leader of that agency, Bruce Barton, declared some ten years later that advertising had been "voted for, and elected" as the method through which consumers wanted to see and hear of new market offerings (Barton 1930, 20).

The J. Walter Thompson (JWT) agency's foremost market and consumer researcher, Paul T. Cherington, eagerly promoted a similar ideology in his 1928 landmark study on the relationship between consumers and advertising. Quoting from a then much publicized economic study by William T. Foster and Waddill Catchings, Cherington saw the "consumer's freedom of choice" vindicated in the "capitalist system," which allowed consumers to "vote for their representatives in industry" through the choices they made (Cherington 1928, 54-5, 58; *JWT News Bulletin* 1926). As an agency, JWT perhaps went furthest in legitimizing the industry's market orientation but also in naming its enemies. "What is the difference between state capitalism and private capitalism," asked a JWT pamphlet in 1937 entitled *A Primer of Capitalism* (Thompson 1937; McGovern 2006, 285; Walker and Sklar 1938, 1-24). The answer lay in sovereign consumers as judge and jury:

> In state capitalism the politician is the boss. He may call himself a king, a general, a dictator, a fuehrer or a super mass-man. But whatever he calls himself, he is a politician. He commands factories to open or close. He tells consumers what they can buy. … Under private capitalism, the Consumer, the Citizen, is boss. The consumer is the voter, the juror, the judge and the executioner. And he doesn't have to wait for election day to vote. He needn't wait for Court for convene before he hands down his verdict. The consumer 'votes' each time he buys one article and rejects another . . . . (Thompson 1937)

This pamphlet in many ways summarized 1930's market populism and its idiosyncratic equation of consumers and jurors/citizens; its equally idiosyncratic equation of consumer power with spending power, which denied the public the right to state-funded or civil society-based empowerment through protection of vulnerable consumers; and its cultural equation of abundant choice provided by large corporations with the "American way of life:" "American business is democracy plus" (Thompson 1937). The triptych of consumption, citizenship, and democracy provided by the JWT agency however would not be complete without the depiction of the fallen angel that still haunted the earthly paradise of Mr. and Mrs. Consumer. This demon was the politician, the little dictator who had set out to put the fulfilling of state directives above the needs of ordinary workers and housewives. The entire narrative of secular salvation that is hidden in the consumer–citizen/juror equation received its unique purgatory power from the demonization of the politician and the delegitimization of the state as macro institution.

The question remains of course as to whether such slogans in trade advertisements and on posters were mere rhetoric produced by an ever-insecure and embattled advertising industry that throughout the 1930s and 1940s became exposed to unprecedented levels of public scrutiny and government legislation (Dameron 1941; Glickman 2001; Jacobs 1999; Kallet and Schlinck 1932; Lynd 1934; Pease 1958; Smith 1979; Stole 2006; Wiedenhoft 2006). Following the anthropologists Franz Boas and Gregory Bateson and the linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, it can be argued that the language used to make sense of consumers, of consumption and a consumer society and the available range of epistemological tools to create the notion of consumption as a field of investigation are closely interconnected. In other words, the intellectual conception of terms such as "free choice," "consumer sovereignty," and the rhetorical and symbolic defense of commercial advertising and consumer marketing in the public sphere went hand in hand with innovations in actual marketing and market research practice. It was vital for the public standing of the advertising industry that its proclaimed democratic credentials were seen to be put into action. Consumer surveys and market research studies provided this crucial proof as they showed

consumers as sovereigns whose voices were heard and whose "commands" were followed up by industry.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the 1930s was the key decade that saw the coming together of a new language of consumer representation and new practices and techniques of consumer investigation. An essential group that was at the heart of this coming together has so far received little attention by historians of the consumer society in Britain and America. Liberal economists, especially the members of and those closely connected to the Austrian School of Economics, were instrumental in the shift of attention away from phenomena of production to the political economy of consumer decision making. This new group of economists, evicted from their home country Austria and still little recognized in their new homes in Britain and the United States, proclaimed the consumer to be the sovereign driver of the economy the same way as the citizen–voter was the sovereign in a political democracy (Schwarzkopf forthcoming).

Although the idea of the powerful consumer, whose aggregate choices ultimately moved the wheels of the economy, originated from Adam Smith (Smith 1776/2003, 568-93; Dixon 1992; Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006), the new generation of economists from Austria made a crucial change to classical liberalism. Those following Smith saw consumer sovereignty as an *ideal*, while the Austrian School saw consumers in "free" markets as the *actual* sovereigns. Any imperfections in the market, which would impede consumers in acting out their role as sovereigns were explained away by nonmarket forces, that is, welfare regulations, tax burdens, trade barriers, and trade unions' attempts at waging class war. Although Adam Smith had warned about the innate drive in entrepreneurs to seek inflated rents, to deceive, and to conspire against the public, no such skepticism was allowed in the new economic theories propagated by the immigrants from Vienna (Smith 2003, 177). For Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich August von Hayek, and Joseph Schumpeter, it was not any longer an ideal that markets could be perfect and that the bargaining power between consumers and producers could be leveled: by allowing free choice, markets were actually perfect democracies and consumers were the sovereigns as long as the state kept its hands out of the game. Where the state came to be represented as a "social apparatus of coercion and compulsion," the market naturally turned into a realm where "each man is free." Not democratic political choices but "the market alone [put] the whole social system in order and [provided] it with sense and meaning" (von Mises 1949, 258).

Drawing on political imagery, von Mises, for example, spoke of the "ballot of the market," in which "consumers by their buying and abstention from buying elect the entrepreneurs in a daily repeated plebiscite as it were" (von Mises 1952, 113). von Mises pushed this equation further and developed the dramatic image of consumers as sovereign "captains" of the ship of industry. Entrepreneurs, he argued, were not supreme but steersmen only, "bound to obey unconditionally the captain's orders. The captain is the consumer" (von Mises 1949, 270). von Mises did not leave it at that but claimed that because consumers were the true captains of industry, markets were the original democracy and thus an even more democratic system than political democracies themselves:

> With every penny spent the consumers determine the direction of all production processes and the details of the organization of all business activities. This state of affairs has been described by calling the market a democracy in which every penny gives a right to cast a ballot. It would be more correct to say that a democratic constitution is a scheme to assign to the citizens in the conduct of government the same supremacy the market economy gives them in their capacity as consumers. However, the comparison is imperfect. In the political democracy only the votes cast for the majority candidate or the majority plan are effective in shaping the course of affairs. The votes polled by the minority do not directly influence policies. But on the market no vote is cast in vain. Every penny spent has the power to work upon the production processes. (von Mises 1949, 271)

Similar to von Mises, von Hayek's theory of democracy put the market-based individual freedom to choose at the center. He saw the system of free consumer choice, based on the movement and exchange of private property, as a necessary condition for the sheer existence of democracy in the first place: 'If "capitalism" means . . . a competitive system based on free disposal over private property, it is far more important to realize *that only within this system is democracy possible*. When it becomes dominated by a collectivist creed, democracy will inevitably destroy itself' (von Hayek 1944/2001, 73, italics added). Markets, money, private property, and consumer choice were thus the ultimate guarantors of freedom, and von Hayek declared it to be a "truth" that if free markets disappeared all other democratic freedoms would disappear with them (von Hayek 1944/2001, 108-9). Although von Hayek's own interpretation of the nature of democracy became more nuanced after World War II (von Hayek 1960/2006, 90-5), the renaissance of the free market ideology during the 1980s saw a return of the earlier structural identification of von Hayek and von Mises of markets and democracies (Friedman and Friedman 1980, 1-12, 222-27; Friedman 1982, 3-16; Phillips-Klein 2009, 34-52; Vanberg 2008).

Joseph Schumpeter, with more subtlety perhaps than von Mises and von Hayek, worked on a similar notion of the interconnectedness and mutual dependency of market capitalism and political democracy. For Schumpeter, democracy was nothing but "a product of the capitalist process" as "historically, the modern democracy rose along with capitalism, and in causal connection with it" (Schumpeter 1942/2008, 296-7). This interconnection was brought about by the principles of choice and competition, which ruled both systems of market and democratic politics. Although Schumpeter was realistic enough to see that competition was hardly ever perfect, he linked both systems through the idea of freedom to choose between competitive offers: in a democracy, as in a market, "everyone is free to compete for political leadership . . . in the same sense in which everyone is free to start another textile

mill" (Schumpeter 1942/2008, 271-2). Schumpeter saw the implications of his theory of democracy clearly. Where democracy was reduced to the "opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule" and the "free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate" (Schumpeter 1942/2008, 285), the principles of branding, choice, and consumer psychology became essential: "The psycho-technics of party-management and party advertising, slogans and marching tunes, are not accessories. They are the essence of politics" (Schumpeter 1942/2008, 283).

The fervor with which the Austrian economists and their subsequent followers pursued their fiction of sovereign consumers and free choice in open markets was a reflection of the ideological pressure and violence they fled when leaving the European continent. In central Europe, extreme right- and left-wing political and economic theoreticians had busied themselves undermining the idea of individual freedoms and of free markets. Most prominent among them in Germany, the legal philosopher Carl Schmitt had declared that sovereignty could only be defined by who took over power in case of exceptional circumstances ("Ausnahmezustand") not by who exercised power when things were in their "normal" state of affairs (von Hayek 1944/2001, 182, 192). In a sense, for these emigrants, the idea of who ruled supreme in a given society ("sovereign") had been stolen by the National Socialists in the German Reich and by the Communists in Soviet Russia. In search of a new sovereign, economists such as von Mises, von Hayek, Schumpeter, and consumer researchers Paul Lazarsfeld, Ernest Dichter, and George Katona needed a new sovereign—and discovered her and him in the consumer.

Von Hayek found his first small, but devoted audience during the 1930s among students and colleagues at the London School of Economics (Coats 1982). Among this audience was the young British economist William Harold Hutt, who in an unpublished essay in 1931 introduced the term "consumer sovereignty," which denoted the alleged rule or sovereignty of consumers in markets concerning the production of goods (Fraser 1939; Harris and Seldon 1959, 79-82; Henderson 1936; Hutt 1934; Hutt 1936, 257-72; Hutt 1940; Reynolds 1997; Trentmann 2006). Central to Hutt's analysis of the relationship between consumers and the market was the notion of choice. Since markets allowed consumers to have a choice between accepting and rejecting a market offering (product, service, employment, etc.) and could always accept an alternative offering, Hutt saw the market as a system that adequately reflected people's preferences. Very much along the same lines, von Hayek argued that even though some consumers and employees may pay what he called a "cruelly high price" for their choices, the market nevertheless did not affect their freedom of choice and thus never coerced (von Hayek 1944/2001, 100). In this perspective, individual consumers' autonomy and preferences had a normative status. The idea of consumer sovereignty was meant to provide an answer to the question of who "ruled" the marketplace and was "in charge" in differentiated market economies. While the Historical School of Economics pointed at governments and various sets of institutions, and Marxists pointed at the bourgeoisie and the owners of the means of production, the new Liberals declared the consumer to be the ultimate sovereign. After the Hayek-admirer Hutt used the term in his 1934 published essay on the structure of competition in free markets, von Hayek himself drew on the term in 1935 (von Hayek 1935, 214). The German ordoliberal thinker Wilhelm Röpke in the same year spoke about capitalist market economies as a "democracy of the consumers," again confirming the normative equation of markets and democracy of Hutt and von Hayek (Röpke 1935, 93). Another German ordoliberal thinker, Walter Eucken, at the same time developed the idea that market capitalism and democracies were necessarily "interdependent" systems (Eucken 1952, 304-24; Meijer 1994).

It would be wrong to infer that either von Mises, von Hayek, Hutt, Schumpeter or the members of the German ordoliberal school were all "market radicals" driven by unreasonable anti-governmental dispositions. The economists briefly reviewed here were all very much aware of the imperfections and dysfunctions of the political and economic processes in market capitalism and sought different, at times opposing, routes to overcome them. The main point pursued here is that, from about the mid-1930s, their thinking brought marketing-related *phenomena*, such as advertising and consumer behavior, and *normative* theories of democracy much closer together than had been the case before. By that virtue, advertising professionals and consumer researchers were now able to claim a share in the defense of democracy during the struggles of the Depression and the Second World War (Francisco 1938; Griffith 1983; Lykins 2003).

Market Research Practice

It is no mere coincidence that during the mid-1930s, the political–philosophical idea of the sovereign consumer as "juror" and "voter" became for the first time directly translated into market research practice. This translation hinged on the introduction of new survey methods that allowed actual consumers in a quasi-experimental setting to deliver a verdict on a given product or commercial message. The consumer jury and the consumer panel were such methods that made the idea of the powerful, informed, and discerning consumer visible in a social setting that brought consumers, researchers, and marketers together in ways not experienced before.

Consumer juries, that is, groups of consumers with the task to select their favorite make of product, most appealing advertisement design, and so on, had been used by the fast moving consumer goods company General Foods in the United States since 1926 (Converse 1987, 91-2, 143; Levy 1999, 455). In 1931–1932, the British chocolate maker Rowntree used its advertising agency JWT and the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP) to test advertisements, packaging appeals, and chocolate flavors with juries of consumers (Fitzgerald 1995, 305-45). However, it was only with Neil Borden's (Harvard Business School) study of the consumer jury method in ranking advertisements in 1935 that a proper methodological

discussion of the research uses of small consumer groups set in (Blankenship 1942; Borden and Lovekin 1935). Borden and his collaborators had chosen a number of series of advertisements, the relative effectiveness of which had been established from circumstantial evidence such as direct sales records (coupon method) and inquiries with companies' sales force and with distributors. They submitted these advertisements to various consumer juries (controlled trial) to determine the relationship between the preferences of these juries and the known relative effectiveness of the advertisements in the various series. Borden's study concluded that this method of ranking advertisements according to their perceived effectiveness was a valid device to judge differences in advertisements' layout and design (Cross 1952; Lockley 1936; Sandage 1948, 458-74).

What from today's standpoint sounds trivial was indeed a revelation in the mid-1930s: it was possible to directly refer to consumers to establish the effectiveness of advertisements, packaging, and other forms of marketing communication. Consumers, thus, could be trusted when they stated their preferences in market and consumer surveys. Rather than relying on frustrating trial and error methods when launching new advertising campaigns or going through expensive test campaigns that compared the take-up of a product in various localities where different advertisement and poster designs had been in circulation, a company could put a jury of consumers together and optimize a sales message before campaign launch and product introduction. In other words, the new sovereign consumer had a voice and this voice could be trusted as it guided the manufacturer and the advertising agency toward product innovations and product messages to which the market would actually respond. Given these advantages, advertising agencies, their clients, and various social research organizations further developed the consumer jury method by turning ad hoc juries into standing, continuous panels of consumers—both panels of individual consumers and household panels—that could be studied over long periods of time with regard to their cumulative expenditure in various product categories, their behavior of switching brands and sales outlets, and also their perception of social issues and of political candidates (Cawl 1943).

The development of continuous consumer panels followed the introduction of the first retail panel (retail audit) by the American market research organization A. C. Nielsen in 1933. A second source for the development of standing consumer panels was the audience research studies conducted under Frank Stanton, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Robert Merton at the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University (Mattelart and Mattelart 1998, 30-2). To record listeners' reactions to various radio programs, Stanton and Lazarsfeld developed their Program Analyzer during 1938. This machine directly recorded in real time, people's assessment of radio broadcasts they listened to by either pressing a green button held in their right hand (to signal "like"), a red button in their left hand (to signal "dislike") or not pressing any button (signaling indifference), audience members set in motion a stylus that drew a graph of "highs" and "lows" on a revolving paper cylinder (Levy 1982; *Time* 1942). Lazarsfeld repeated these audience surveys with the same sample of people (panels) to refine his measurement techniques and detect changes in audience taste over time. The Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer thus provided the new sovereign of the marketplace, the consumer, with scepter and orb in their right and left hand to rule the new territory of radio entertainment.

During the 1940s and early 1950s, marketing organizations such as the advertising agency JWT, Ernest Dichter's Institute for Motivational Research in Croton-on-Hudson, social research organizations such as Mass Observation, the BBC Listener Research Department (both United Kingdom), Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau for Applied Social Research, and government research units under Rensis Likert and Samuel Stouffert refined the use of consumer panels, consumer focus groups, depth interviews, and consumer juries (Converse 1987, 88-99; Goldish 1954-1955; Igo 2007, 180-6; Lazarsfeld 1975; Robinson 1999, 121-5; Weld 1942). Although some of these market research practitioners were united only by deep rifts of mutual suspicion—Paul Lazarsfeld and Alfred Politz harbored professional misgivings about what they saw as amateurish charlatans being at work at the Dichter Institute—they also shared the belief that consumers deserved closer and more intensive analysis in a modern market economy. Again, it was the advertising agencies that symbolically exploited the existence of those new research methods and turned these innovations into a public propaganda advantage.

In May 1959, the JWT agency published a trade advertisement in *Fortune* magazine, *Advertising Age*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, which advertised the usefulness of its 5,000 strong panel of housewives. Under the headline "A remarkably accurate marketing tool," JWT described how it had refined the consumer panel method since 1939 and developed it into a research tool that delivered a "continuing, day-by-day picture of how the American people are actually buying by region, market size, age, education, income, race" (*Advertising Age* 1959). As over 5,000 housewives reported their families' day-to-day purchases in over 30 product categories, marketers learned what brands housewives bought, at what price and amount, in what store, when, and from what brand they switched. The consumer panel was thus a method that allowed to poll the opinion of King Consumer on a daily basis and showed the advertising agency as an organization in a favorable light. Against those who argued that advertising agencies manipulated consumers, advertising agencies and their scientifically trained market research personnel could now present themselves as social forces that allowed the democratic voice of the real sovereign of America—the hard-working housewife, the honest shopper—to be heard as loud and as clear as possible.

This JWT advertisement and in particular its headline celebrating the "remarkable" accuracy of the new method of the housewife panel should make us suspicious. Although the JWT agency at that time ran perhaps the world's largest market research organization, it nevertheless felt obliged to press home the reliability and accuracy of this still relatively new consumer research tool. This alerts us to the fact that

managers were still skeptical about investing time and money in tracking consumers' past behavior to predict their choices tomorrow. This skepticism was not unfounded, given that the *Reader's Digest's* and the Gallup organization's failure in 1936 and in 1948, respectively, to correctly forecast the American election outcome undermined market researchers' and opinion pollsters' claim to reliability and trustworthiness. Similar, albeit on smaller scale, market research blunders occurred throughout the postwar era and gave rise to a considerable academic cottage industry based on testing and verifying various consumer research tools, including the consumer panel (Sudman 1962).

As a young socialist in Vienna, Paul Lazarsfeld had been drawn to new modes of social research investigations because he noticed the "*methodological* equivalence of socialist voting and the buying of soap" (Lazarsfeld 1969, 279; italics added). This equivalence was of course established by the behavioral similarity of a consumer/voter "choosing" between different offerings. Yet, this phenomenological identity did not necessarily have to be translated into a noumenal identity of citizen/voter and consumer/shopper and those who did opened themselves up to a range of methodological pitfalls. Thus, Lazarsfeld and other market and opinion researchers made a political—not scientific—decision to equate consumer choices and political choices as equivalent or even identical (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). At the heart of this engineered transformation of voting as an expression of political struggle and latent civil war (Carl Schmitt) into mere "choice" was the consumer/voter panel and the survey questionnaire that, in the words of the sociologist of mass media Todd Gitlin, facilitated the "convergence of consumer choice and political knowing, of voting and soap-buying in the lives of citizens" and sidelined alternative methodologies that could have inquired "into the origins of this convergence instead of taking it methodologically for granted" (Gitlin 1978, 239; Glickman 2006).

Despite the epistemological and methodological uncertainties surrounding many of the new consumer research and opinion polling techniques, advocates of liberal macroeconomic policies ("free" and "open" markets, unfettered consumer choice) used the purely symbolic and merely theoretical similarity between consumer and voter or jury member to directly legitimize marketing and market research practices. Lazarsfeld, himself a key figure in the establishment of scientific market and consumer research, managed to convince the Ford Foundation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other organizations that empirical social research, market surveys, and opinion polling could help further the growth and progress of the American way of life and democracy in postwar Europe (Pollak 1980). Even a David Riesman, a staunch critic of American bureaucratic and corporate culture, was taken in by the professional narratives the consumer and market researchers created around themselves. In his famous book *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman lauded the market research community for the potentially liberating character of their work for an increasingly "outer-directed" society:

> Market research has for many years seemed to me one of the most promising channels for democratic control of our economy. Market researchers know as well as anyone that their methods need not be used simply to manipulate people into buying the goods and cultural definitions that already exist or to dress them up in marginal differentiations but can be used to find out not so much what people want but what with liberated fantasy they might want. Without "mock-ups" and pilot models, people rarely enough make this leap of the imagination. (Riesman 1953/1955, 344)

At the same time, alternative methods of empowering consumers through independent product testing were frustrated by the same industries that claimed market research made them more responsive to consumer needs. The Consumers' Union, for example, found that newspapers would not print its advertisement for fear of upsetting advertising clients from the consumer industries (Oxenfeldt 1950). Yet, the discourse of the "free consumer vote" had by now escaped the compound of methodological debates and entered the battleground of the cultural cold war in which marketing and consumer research as a subject took a prominent part (Schwarzkopf 2005).

Implications and Social Consequences of the "Consumer–Voter"

The deeply political origins of the consumer–voter equation calls both for a factual history of market and consumer research and for more research on the symbolic and linguistic representation of certain market research tools and their sociopolitical meaning. The "consumer jury" or the idea of the consumer–voter thus changes from being a marketing myth into a very political myth indeed. Consumer research techniques, such as the jury test or the panel method, can therefore be stripped of their veil of being "objective" scientific techniques as these techniques have been embedded by their proponents in certain visions of the market and because they are laden with a political vision of the role of consumers in a "free market." In the course of the institutionalization of consumer and market research as a set of material practices, its proponents took recourse to linguistic arguments, that is, rhetoric. These arguments soon began to create a web of industry-wide beliefs and myths, which also constrained the actors that promoted the institutionalization of the consumer and research industry in the first place (Green, Li, and Nohria 2009; cf. Melander 2005). Moreover, as proponents of a new form of *scientific* practice, namely, that of empirical research of consumer behavior, consumer researchers also had to fit in with the wider social–ideological frameworks of their period to find acceptance among industrial and governmental clients, civil society groups, and opinion formers like journalists. Rhetoric, as Feyerabend and other sociologists of science have argued, is often used to achieve this social fit for new scientific practices (Feyerabend 1993, 9-11).

Rhetorical strategies that linked market research companies and the advertising industry to the aims of democracy were

indispensable as key marketing concepts such as "choice," "preference," "market offering," and "competition" became highly politicized ideas during the interwar years. From around 1917, something of a global civil war began to rage that pitted antiliberal statists and the champions of market-based capitalism against each other. Both sides proposed "total" solutions and all-encompassing visions of society. Lenin, Mussolini, and Mao Zedong saw the world pushed forward and structured by Party organizations and "revolutionary classes." Liberals, like some of the members of the Mont Pèlerin Society, abhorred collectivist and state-oriented structures and institutions yet realized that theirs' was a revolutionary vision, too (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). In his liberal manifesto *The Good Society*, the American sociologist Walter Lippmann prophesized that market-based liberalism would bring about "nothing else but a revolution in the world's way of life" and that this revolution was indeed the "unfinished mission" of a reformed liberalism (1937, 194-5). For advertising practitioners and market researchers, the success of this mission inevitably relied on an interpretation of society as constituted of a consuming public and ultimately structured by consumer choice.

Despite the complications and limitations that recent research into consumer–citizens, consumer–voters and consumer sovereignty has discovered with regard to the idea of the "consumption = voting" equation, it has so far failed to inform the historical debate about the origins of consumer surveys and opinion polling (Benton 1987; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Dixon 1992; Dolan 2002; Dumas 2006; Lowery 1998; Markus and Schwartz forthcoming; Penz 1986, 4-6; Quelch and Jocz 2007, 11-23; Redmond 2000; Wensley 1990; Xing 2001). This should not surprise us. As shown above, the advance of consumer survey methodologies and the growth in public influence of those who benefited from this advance was based on the illusion that more market research, more consumer panels, and more marketing statistics meant more democracy. As Feyerabend argued, the advancement of science and of scientific method in general are based on necessary bluffs, deceptive strategies, and opportunistic changes in argumentations and methodologies. These strategies are part and parcel of scientific development and the rise of consumer research is no different in this respect. At a time when social surveys and questionnaires where unknown, mistrusted, or had a sinister "left-wing" touch in the eyes of many manufacturers and public administrators, consumer research and opinion polling pioneers such as Lazarsfeld, Roper, Gallup, Dichter, and Katona resorted to the idea of consumers casting "votes" to legitimize their work. Regarding the rise of market research, the invention of the consumer jury, the survey panel and the focus group was perhaps this struggling science's most ingenious "political manoeuvre" (Feyerabend 1993, 16).

Market and Consumer Research as Political Project

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment discovered the idea that if people were left to their own devices and were allowed to follow their own interests, "the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord" (Smith 1776/2003, 873). Applied to the ability of consumers to communicate their needs and to make choices, the argument emerged during the nineteenth century that consumers should therefore be allowed freely to take decisions about what is good for them or not. The free, democratic, and leveling nature of the market later came to be reflected in the concept of consumer sovereignty. This concept was not forgotten but lay somewhat dormant and was taken for granted during the late nineteenth century until it was rediscovered for political and ideological purposes during the interwar years by the Austrian School of Economics. At the heart of the popularization of this concept were the advertising and market research industries that had a vested interest in moving social research from a "critical" to a more administrative research agenda, which served the purposes of marketing management (Lazarsfeld 1941). Advertising agencies in particular were at the forefront of attempts to revive and popularize the concept of the consumer as sovereign voter in a market structure that resembled the political process. These attempts to culturally and socially legitimize advertising communication received political–philosophical credibility from a new generation of economists spearheaded by the Hayek-pupil William Harold Hutt. Both advertising and market research practitioners and academics for different reasons reinforced the myth that capitalism and "free markets" were merely the economic equivalent of democracies.

The unquestioned dominance that this myth has acquired is detrimental to contemporary marketing science debates as it deflects attention from ubiquitous circumstances in which marketing activities usurp and override consumers' sovereignty. If the concepts of the active consumer, of the consumer as citizen, and of consumer sovereignty are to be at the heart of the marketing concept philosophy, then a historical knowledge of which groups hijacked these concepts at which moment and for what purpose is vital to restore the credibility of marketing as a social institution by which consumers communicate their needs to business and through which business satisfies these needs in a responsible and socially and environmentally sustainable manner.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Fonte: Journal of Macromarketing, v. 31, n. 1, p. 8-18, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <www.sagepub.com>. Acesso em: 29 mar. 2011.