Introduction

As a practical exercise, marketing is concerned with meeting and satisfying customer needs, provided, that is, such an exercise would be profitable to the organisation. Satisfying customer needs, it is argued, forms the moral foundation of the marketing concept (Crane, 2000; Crane and Desmond, 2002; Kotler and Levy, 1969). However, even with marketing scholars signalling their ‘customer focus’ and commitment to customer satisfaction, since the 1960s there has been greater attention directed to the ‘dark-side of marketing’. Rather than focusing on the beneficial aspects of the marketing system in ensuring the distribution of an ever widening assortment of goods and services, the ecological impact of marketing has garnered greater interest. By promoting goods and services, marketing is implicated in ecological despoliation and the stimulation of envy and consumer discontent (Richins, 1995). As Crane (2000: 13) correctly notes, marketing activities weigh upon the social environment in a variety of ways:

. . . marketing activities can be seen to have further contributed to environmental deterioration through its reliance on enormous quantities of packaging, the creation of out-of-town shopping centres and the resource-sapping movement of consumer goods across the globe. The demands of the grocery and fast food industries for standardization and predictability in food products in the name of customer satisfaction has also led to myriad ecological problems associated with the use of agrochemicals, industrial pesticides and genetically modified crops
The importance of marketing activities, the continued enrolment of students on marketing courses in ever greater numbers and thus the diffusion of marketing discourse throughout society, means that marketing is a socially, politically and economically potent force in the world today (Hackley, 2003; Kangun, 1972; Laczniak and Michie, 1979).

In view of this power, it is an appropriate time to call attention to marketing theory and practice, revealing those background assumptions that pervade the discipline and the effects of marketing as a societal practice. Attention should be directed to highlighting how this discipline and practical endeavour have developed and continue to change. Such a project would be similar to the immanent criticism described by Theodor Adorno (1967), so that those values that the marketing student is exposed to through their ‘mainstream’ marketing education are illuminated for what they are, namely culturally and geographically contingent phenomena that should not be uncritically subscribed to or exported throughout the globe (Dholakia et al., 1980).

But it would also go beyond Adorno’s version of critique, perhaps in the direction of an ‘intimate critique’. In the latter form of critique, marketing should be viewed from an appropriately historical dimension, with us all – as students and scholars – asking questions about the development of marketing, about whether it is developing in a way that we would like. This type of critique is about ‘resisting resignation and accommodation to what is’. To be critical of marketing is not to be negative and dismissive of all that marketing activities have given to society (see also Shultz, 2007). Our vision of the relationship between marketing and critique is more affirmative. To be critical is to ‘prevent the foreclosure of possibility, to keep the future of a different future open’ (Kompridis, 2005: 340).

To take one example of the foreclosure of possibility – that is, the foreclosure of an alternative way of thinking about and engaging in marketing practice – we need only refer to the recent redefinitions of marketing. Before we touch upon this, a brief excursion into the history of marketing is necessary. Only then can we begin to sketch out more thoroughly what we mean by ‘critical’ marketing, illustrating this by reference to work that we think deserves this label. Let us begin.

Marketing as a Managerial Discourse

Even before the emergence of marketing as an academic discipline in the early twentieth century, marketing practitioners had articulated a managerialist agenda by focusing on business needs rather than, say, the detrimental effect of marketing on society (Coolsen, 1960/1978; Karlinsky, 1987; Tadajewski and Jones, 2008). In an important study, Coolsen documented the business activities and theoretical contributions of a number of nineteenth century economists who argued that business practitioners should produce and market those goods that consumers required in both domestic and international marketing contexts.
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(i.e. the marketing concept) (see also Dixon, Chapter 5; Jones and Richardson, 2007). This managerialist emphasis remains central to the identity of the discipline.

Yet, in the early twentieth century, marketing scholars also played socially activist roles, addressing issues beyond business concerns. Two of the earliest contributors to academic marketing thought, Henry Charles Taylor and Edward David Jones at the University of Wisconsin, demonstrated ‘an explicit concern with ethics, sometimes manifested in social activism’ (Jones, 1994: 70). Taylor, for example, was interested in what was called ‘the marketing problem’. This related to the issue of whether middlemen were manipulating the prices for consumer goods, in this case, the prices obtained for farm products (i.e. the price received by the farmer was far less than the consumer paid). Highlighting his activist position, Taylor founded in 1917 ‘the American Association for Agricultural Legislation for the purposes of studying agricultural legislation and making recommendations on policy matters to government’ (Jones, 1994: 76). The task of research conducted under the auspices of this association was to critically examine marketing legislation and issues related to producer and consumer protection, among others.

During the 1920s, this concern for the marketing problem was complemented by an interest in the ‘consumer problem’, that is, with improving marketing activities, in order to clear the market more effectively of the glut of consumer goods made available by the massive growth in production facilities following the First World War. The impact of this shift has been that since the turn of the twentieth century there has been increasing attention given to managerial issues such as improving marketing and consumer research (Frederick, 1959) and producing more effective advertising (Tipper et al., 1917), rather than concerted interest in distributive justice or other societal concerns, as Dixon illustrates in Chapter 5.

The social activist role that Jones and Taylor exhibited has continued to be espoused periodically throughout the past century. Of course, it would appear in different guises, some reinforcing and encouraging the stimulation of consumption, others not. Promoting higher levels of consumption in the 1950s, for instance, was believed to be desirable, as it was thought that this would strengthen the United States (US) economy and enable the US and free markets to triumph over state controlled production and consumption in Russia (Cheskin, 1960; Dichter, 1960). In the 1960s there was the ‘broadening’ of the boundaries of marketing to include nonprofit activities (Kotler and Levy, 1969; Laczniak and Michie, 1979). The 1970s witnessed the articulation of ecological marketing and in-depth research relating to the relationship between marketing, public policy and disadvantaged consumers (Kangun, 1972). By the 1980s the voluntary simplicity and green consumer movements began to rise to prominence.

Despite being buffeted by these movements in theory and practice marketing has, at the same time, undoubtedly become increasingly managerially-focused (Firat and Dholakia, 1982; Firat, 1985; Firat et al., 1987). Wilkie and Moore (2006) have done an admirable job of drawing out how the changing definition of marketing is circumscribing the issues that are of concern to scholars and practitioners. What they underscore is the progressive
elimination of marketing and society related issues from the definition of marketing. Specifically, they note the definitions of marketing in the work of Arch Shaw, Wroe Alderson and Ralph Breyer, contrasting these with a recent American Marketing Association [AMA] definition. These authors each defined marketing in the following ways:

(1) The accepted system of distribution was built up on the satisfying of staple needs... this sort of activity has... contributed to the progress of civilization; (2) Society can no more afford an ill-adjusted system of distribution than it can inefficient and wasteful methods of production; and (3) the middleman is a social necessity. (Shaw 1912: 708, 706, and 737)

It is the responsibility of the marketing professor, therefore, to provide a marketing view of competition in order to guide efforts at regulation and to revitalize certain aspects of the science of economics... For surely no one is better qualified to play a leading part in the consideration of measures designed for the regulation of competition. (Alderson 1937: 189, 190)

Marketing is not primarily a means for garnering profits for individuals. It is, in the larger, more vital sense, an economic instrument used to accomplish indispensable social ends... A marketing system designed solely for its social effectiveness would move goods with a minimum of time and effort to deficit points... [and] provide a fair compensation, and no more, for the efforts of those engaged in the activity. At the same time it would provide the incentive needed to stimulate constant improvements in its methods. These are the prime requisites of social effectiveness (Breyer 1934: 192). (Wilkie and Moore, 2006: 225)

Wilkie and Moore note that from the first AMA definition outlined in 1935 which would be unmodified until 1985, only to change again in 2004, marketing has moved from being...

... the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. (1935) [To marketing as] the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives. (1985) [And most recently] Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and stakeholders. (Wilkie and Moore, 2006: 227)

There are a number of problems with this shifting definition of marketing as Moorman (1987) registers. Marketing, she proposes, has been reduced to the level of ‘technique’, that is, to the uncritical application of various methods, tools and ways of thinking in relation to marketing activities. Technique is results oriented and this ‘preoccupation with results fixates the performer on achieving the results to the near exclusion of recognizing other benefits and problems derived from the process itself’ (Moorman, 1987: 194). Because of
this results focus, technique is also amoral, as there is less of a concern with what is right, what is ethical, and more interest in what will work. Connecting this with the historical development of marketing Moorman opines that the 1985 definition of marketing was one further step toward making marketing more like the amoral technique she describes.

She outlines her argument in a variety of ways. Firstly, given that marketing is depicted in the above definition as an organisational activity, it will be concerned with results (i.e. customer satisfaction, achieving organisational objectives etc.). This becomes problematic because ‘marketers operate in an environment where there is an overwhelming emphasis on achieving results [which] may in fact lead them to neglect the consequences of their acts. Most important is the tendency to ignore the implications of results. Marketing practitioners have been criticized for this tendency by pursuing short-term results without considering the repercussions of such results on the environment’ [Moorman, 1987: 198].

While marketing ethicists have been quick to outline sets of guidelines for ethical and socially responsible marketing, it is also often pointed out that pragmatic company level goals will work against ethical guidelines. Marketing managers, Laczniak and Murphy (2006) acknowledge, are responsible for ensuring the efficiency of marketing activities. They are likely to focus primarily on the managerial effectiveness of any given activity (i.e. will it get the job done quickly and effectively), rather than on its moral basis.

Desmond (1998) focuses on a significant issue here when he notes that as organisational actors we are ‘rarely faced directly with the consequences of our actions’ [Desmond, 1998: 179]. Thus, we are not faced with the child slave labour that has produced our highly priced, expensively marketed sports shoe. Nor do we witness the environmental waste discharged into a river as a result of the manufacturing process. As he puts it, once ‘the face of the other has been “effaced”, employees are freed from moral responsibility to focus on the technical (purpose centred or procedural) aspects of the “job at hand”’ [Desmond, 1998: 178].

Putting this into marketing terms, macro questions about the impact of a firm’s actions on society are likely to be neglected – as Wilkie and Moore (2006) and Moorman (1987) also suggest (cf. Bartkus and Glassman, forthcoming; Gaski, 1999; Thompson, 1995). Affirming Desmond’s (1995, 1998) comments, Laczniak and Murphy maintain that,

> Not surprisingly, the pragmatics of company goals, as well as the defined job responsibilities of individual managers, directs the majority of marketing outcome evaluation toward micro (firm-level) practices... It is not so much that the consideration of ethics is actively opposed in organizations; rather, it is somewhat forgotten in the... quest to achieve economic and financial goals. (Laczniak and Murphy, 2006: 155)

So, what we see here is a shift in the definition of marketing so that it moves from being ‘transferable to more aggregated issues such as competition, system performance, and contributions to human welfare’ to a narrow focus on individual firm-based concerns (Wilkie and Moore, 2006: 227). Such a micro-level focus is not necessarily bad, although
as Laczniak and Murphy (2006) indicate, it can have negative consequences. What is problematic is the fact that this definition of marketing serves to marginalise questions relating to the interaction between marketing and society beyond the proximate concerns of the firm. Marketing must be based on a larger conception of its role in society (Tadajewski and Jones, 2008; Wilkie and Moore, 2006).

The AMA appears to have realised that their most recent definition bore a distinct managerial bias. In a recent communication via the ELMAR email distribution list (24th December, 2007), we are presented with an updated definition of marketing. It reads: ‘Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large’ (Lib, 2007).

To be charitable, the new definition is a first move in the right direction. It might not signal the complete rethinking of the role of marketing in society that some might like, and the ‘devil is certainly in the details’ regarding how this definition is enacted in practice (Witkowski, 2005). But, in the interests of critical reflection, let us pose some questions that we hope students and scholars alike will bear in mind while reading this book. Firstly, to what extent is the definition window-dressing for the academy in the face of the vociferous criticism found in recent issues of the Journal of Public Policy and Marketing? Only time will tell. But, if the definition functions in the same way as corporate codes of ethics, that is, in terms of providing an ethical salve for our conscience, while we continue with business as usual, we might rightly be cautious in heralding this definition as indicative of a greater macro emphasis in marketing.

In addition, we all operate – much like the marketing practitioners discussed earlier – in a specific intellectual and cultural climate. The new definition of marketing will be of little use if it does not fundamentally alter the moral and ethical compass of the academy. This, in itself, is unlikely to happen. As Shapiro has remarked, an intellectual focus on the relationship between marketing and society has ‘been and today remains a relatively neglected domain of marketing’ (Shapiro, 2006: 250). The reason why is that ‘prevailing opinion seems to be that managerial, behavioral, and methodological concerns and courses have dominated academic marketing for a number of decades and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future’ (Shapiro, 2006: 250). This focus continues to be reflected in the Marketing Science Institute’s research priorities which make no mention of societal related issues (see http://www.msi.org/research/index.cm?id=43). We wonder how soon these will change to better reflect the new definition of marketing?

To be sure, there are alternative readings of the history and future of marketing that could, it might be claimed, suggest that marketers are less technique oriented and more socially responsible. The emergence of the social, societal and ecological marketing concepts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s would figure prominently here. The so-called ‘broadening’ of the marketing concept in the form of ‘social marketing’ was one response by scholars to make marketing relevant in a social climate that was beginning to register
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the detrimental effect of marketing activities on society (Andreasen, 2003; Kotler, 2005). But before we uncritically valorise social marketing, positioning it as part of any critical marketing project as some have done (e.g. Hastings and Saren, 2003), let us look at social marketing more closely.

Critical Social Marketing?

Recently redefined as ‘the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are a part’, social marketing is currently prominent in research and teaching agendas (Andreasen, 1994: 110). To be called social marketing, a programme must ‘apply commercial marketing technology’, ‘have as its bottom line the influencing of voluntary behavior’ and ‘primarily seek to benefit individuals/families or the broader society and not the marketing organization itself’ (Andreasen, 1994: 112).

Understandably, social marketing has received government and non-governmental support across the world (Andreasen, 2003). To assume that the positive benefits of social marketing are actually translated into practice is, however, a mistake. Certainly, while there are papers that register some of the difficulties associated with using commercial marketing theory in social marketing studies (e.g. Bloom and Novelli, 1979), social marketing is usually depicted in positive terms (Dholakia and Dholakia, 2001), sometimes for perfectly valid reasons (Witkowski, 2005). By contrast, Moorman (1987) sees the emergence of social marketing as a further augmentation of marketing as ‘technique’, bringing behavioural and social change into the purview of marketing practitioners.

If social marketing was to be part of the critical marketing project that Hastings and Saren (2003) and Hastings (2007) appear to think it is, we would expect social marketers to exhibit some degree of reflexivity about their presuppositions and regarding the limitations of social marketing (Brenkert, 2002; Brownlie, 2006). The fact that the aforementioned scholars exhibit little reflexivity regarding the ideology that social marketing surrounds itself with, failing to juxtapose this against societal reality is uncritical by its very nature.

Outside of the marketing literature we find a less positive representation of social marketing (although cf. Dholakia, 1984). In an important work, James Pfeiffer has detailed the complex interrelationships between condom social marketing in Sub-Saharan Africa and structural adjustment programmes. He notes how the diffusion of social marketing practices across the globe are not, in fact, ‘driven by a thoroughly demonstrated efficacy in improving health by motivating behavior change’ (Pfeiffer, 2004: 77).

Social marketing (SM) campaigns, he claims, are rarely independently evaluated. More specifically, ‘the widespread embrace of SM by many international nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and ministries, especially in Africa, can be traced more directly to
the promotion of privatization and free-market economics in the era of structural adjustment across the region’ [Pfeiffer, 2004: 78]. Social marketing is not, therefore, simply a neutral tool to promote behavioural change, but in Africa fundamentally tied to neoliberal economic policies. According to Pfeiffer, historically the support of social marketing in Africa has been linked with institutions (i.e. The World Bank) promoting structural adjustment programmes that require governments to reduce their levels of spending on public services. In Africa, ‘this rollback in public service has coincided with the deepening AIDS crisis’ [Pfeiffer, 2004: 78]. It was in this context that the benefits of social marketing were touted by Western nongovernmental organisations who arrived with ‘a prepackaged approach to AIDS prevention that could be easily integrated into ongoing economic reform programs that emphasized “cost-effectiveness” as the bottom line for priority setting in health’ [Pfeiffer, 2004: 78].

In particular, Pfeiffer notes how the social marketing campaign he studied (which aimed to promote the use of condoms) was interpreted by the target audience and other stakeholders (i.e. church pastors) as promoting promiscuity. By contrast to the argument that social marketing programmes should begin with extensive consumer and market research [Andreasen, 1994], the marketers in this case neglected to examine their target market in sufficient detail. Church pastors who were influential in the backlash against the marketing programme ‘spoke angrily of the campaign that they believe has helped contribute to the AIDS crisis. This clash of messages illustrates how SM approaches to changing behaviours as complex and socially volatile as sexuality may not only be ineffective, but may actually be harmful, because genuine community participation, dialogue, and monitoring are excluded from the process, while structural determinants and social context of “high-risk” behaviors are left unaddressed’ [Pfeiffer, 2004: 79].

In this case, no real attempt was made to determine how community relations could be fostered, and this was ultimately harmful both to community–social marketer relations but also in terms of encouraging the socially beneficial behaviours that form the axiology of social marketing [see BBC News, 2007]. Is social marketing, therefore, morally neutral or of a higher moral order than traditional marketing, as Hastings [2003] appears to gesture? We would suspect that a response to this depends on which side of the fence one sits.

Social marketers would, by and large, support Hastings’ view. But even here we are faced with some equivocation. As Lusch et al. (1980) note, there are certain areas where social marketing might be considered more ethical than others (see also Laczeniak and Michie, 1979). From their survey of professors of ethics, social-psychology academics and marketing practitioners they concluded that marketing ‘techniques applied to areas like conservation, preventative health, and auto safety were generally perceived to be much more ethical than were applications to homosexual rights, political candidates and their platforms, and pornographic entertainment’ [Lusch et al., 1980: 161].

Lusch et al. raise a number of key questions such as ‘who is the villain when ethically sensitive issues are promoted or marketed? Are marketers or those that hire them
to promote the issues to blame? Those on the side of the marketers might argue that social marketing techniques are merely tools which, when used properly, can aid effective communication or when misused, can compound social abuse’ [Lusch et al., 1980: 162; emphases in original]. Consumer advocates would, they indicate, approach the issue differently, arguing that the marketers should take at least ‘partial responsibility for the impact of any social marketing program or idea which has been professionally marketed’ [Lusch et al., 1980: 163].

Pfeiffer’s (2004) work clearly indicates how the rhetoric of social marketing is not consistent with its actual enactment in the field. The point of Lusch et al.’s work for this discussion is that it highlights how essential it is that uncomfortable questions such as these do get raised. It is equally crucial that we continue to question the changing boundaries of the definition of marketing, scrutinising which issues are subsequently marginalised as a result. Critique of marketing theory and practice should, we believe, take the form of a readiness to ask such difficult questions. It is, to paraphrase Kompridis (2005), a continual process of revealing unquestioned assumptions and of re-evaluating the values that marketing is founded upon. In the next section, we want to examine this proposal in more detail.

**Critical Marketing is . . .**

Let us start to flesh out what the label ‘critical marketing’ might actually refer to. In management disciplines over the last thirty years there has been a surge of interest in ‘critical’ approaches [e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979/1992; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980]. The publication of Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992) collection, *Critical Management Studies*, is believed to have heralded the explicit branding of a diverse range of scholars, subscribing to a range of critical positions under one label [Fournier and Grey, 2000]. It might be expected that critical marketing would be closely affiliated with this area of scholarship. This would be largely correct.

Assuming this connection, what then is critical marketing? Following the articulation of critical management by Fournier and Grey (2000), the grammar of critical marketing could bear the hallmarks of theoretical pluralism, methodological pluralism and boundaries delineated by a commitment on three fronts: ontological denaturalisation, epistemological reflexivity and a non-performative stance [Brownlie, 2006; Dholakia et al., 1980; Firt et al., 1987; Monieson, 1981; O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002; Parker, 1995]. What this latter criterion signals is that critical marketing research is not undertaken with the sole interest of developing knowledge to enable marketing managers to maximise the sales of goods or services with minimal expenditure (i.e. non-performative).

This non-performative criterion is shared to some extent with those involved with ‘Consumer Culture Theoretics’ (CCT) [Arnould and Thompson, 2007] – except that there
appears to be more of a concern for managerial relevance in this area than we would support (e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869, 870, 876; Thompson et al., 2006). But, then, to assume that any critical marketing research could never be co-opted or not necessarily used in a beneficial manner by any stakeholder is, nonetheless, too strong a position to hold. We would add, though, that the very definition of ‘beneficial’, and to whose benefit such knowledge was being invoked, should be subject to critical scrutiny.

What we do have concerns about is the overriding profit motive adopted by many companies which can be detrimental to the interests of society. As Kilbourne (2002) has remarked, there are other goals in life that marketers should foster and which the market often does not [Hudson and Hudson, 2003]. Broadly speaking, these include human solidarity, distributive ‘justice, community, [and] human development, [and] ecological balance’ and these ‘should be brought to bear on the governance of economic activity. We are fundamentally critical of the notion that the pursuit of profit will automatically satisfy these broader goals’ (Adler, 2002: 387) – as the comments by Desmond [1995, 1998], Jacques et al. (2003), Moorman [1987], Thompson [2004] and Laczañik and Murphy (2006) testify.

Continuing through Fournier and Grey’s [2000] criteria, ontological denaturalisation involves the recognition that the way our ‘consumer society’ is structured is not an inevitable historical development; it is a very specific event and could be rethought of along different lines. In this case, critical marketing asserts the prevalence of power relations structuring reality, knowledge and human interests that determine how we view the role of marketing in society and whether or not it is possible to envision an alternative structure of market relations. Critical marketing would thus attempt to question the extent to which specific claims made in support of marketing practice affect society.

Finally, critical marketing scholarship should exhibit a degree of reflexivity. It should refuse the positivist injunction that ‘reality’ exists external to the researcher. Instead, critical marketing scholarship should recognise the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge about marketing phenomena. Of course, these three criteria are clearly going to continue to develop [Whittle and Spicer, forthcoming] and at this point most marketing scholarship cannot be considered critical, if by critical it must meet all three of the above criteria. There are, nonetheless, multiple lines of research, across a diverse range of paradigmatic perspectives that do exhibit elements of the qualities that Fournier and Grey [2000] gesture toward.

Registering the much slower speed that critical approaches have diffused through marketing scholarship [Burton, 2001; McDonagh, 1995] and the ‘easy complacency of mainstream thought on a variety of marketing topics’ that the contributors to the edited collections, Changing the Course of Marketing: Alternative Paradigms for Widening Marketing Theory [Dholakia and Arndt, 1985], Philosophical and Radical Thought in Marketing [Firat et al., 1987] and the Rethinking Marketing conference in the early 1990s diagnosed [e.g. Brownlie et al., 1999: 4], we prefer to depart from Fournier and Grey’s
(2000) work. It is a useful introduction to what a critical marketing studies approach could take, but at this point the practice of critique in critical marketing studies is united more by a problematising style of thinking and reflection and the adoption of a ‘limit attitude’, as we shall see (Healy, 2001).

**Critical Theory and Marketing: Back to the 1940s**

Scholarship that we believe constitutes the basis of ‘critical marketing studies’ is, for us, underscored by the question ‘to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?’ (Foucault, 1992: 9). This is an attempt to adopt a ‘limit attitude’ towards marketing. It is not a simple rejection of all marketing theory and practice per se. Rather it involves an attempt to probe the limits of what marketing currently stands for as an intellectual and practical endeavour. As Foucault (1984: 45) puts it, ‘Criticism... consists of analyzing and reflecting on limits’.

Now, of course, this can be interpreted as a fairly traditional form of critique, as when a logical empiricist reflects on the limits of a specific theory. The perspectives we list below can be differentiated from the ‘received view’ of knowledge production in marketing by the explicit oppositional stance that they take to ‘mainstream’ marketing theory and practice and by the use of critical social theory in some form. The range of literature that we reference is only indicative of critical perspectives in marketing, but should provide enough of an outline to destabilise the idea that marketing is as woefully bereft of engagement with critical perspectives as Alvesson (1994) and Alvesson and Willmott (1996) opine (see Tadajewski and Maclaran, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

**Marketing and Critical Theory in the 1940s**

Marketing has actually been ‘critical’, if we mean critical in the sense of the Frankfurt School version of ‘unmasking critique’ (e.g. Adorno and Becker, 1999: 23), for quite some time. As early as 1941 the work of the critical theorists was described via the use of a number of marketing examples by Paul Lazarsfeld (1941). In this paper, Lazarsfeld contrasted administrative and critical communications research. Administrative research was research conducted for some public or private group and whose overriding emphasis was usually on solving problems relating to business activities. The majority of research, he suggested, fell into this category. By contrast, Lazarsfeld argued that critical research can be distinguished from administrative research in two key ways. Critical research ‘develops a theory of prevailing social trends of our times... and it seems to imply ideas of basic human values according to which all actual or desired effects should be appraised’ (Lazarsfeld, 1941: 9).
Using a number of examples, Lazarsfeld proposed that from a critical perspective ‘our times are engulfed by a multitude of promotional patterns… coupled with the feeling that human beings, as a result, behave more and more like pawns on a chessboard, losing the spontaneity and dignity which is the basic characteristic of human personality’ (Lazarsfeld, 1941: 10). In outlining an example of the way in which what has varyingly been called the ‘promotional culture’ (Lazarsfeld, 1941), ‘consciousness industry’ (Klein and Leiss, 1978), ‘culture industries’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) and ‘distraction factories’ (Kracauer, 1989) shape our perception, Lazarsfeld draws upon an example sketched by Theodor Adorno. Imagine, says Lazarsfeld,

... you find a large brewery advertises its beer by showing a man disgustedly throwing aside a newspaper full of European war horrors while the caption says that in times like these the only place to find peace, strength, and courage is at your own fireside drinking beer. What will be the result if symbols referring to such basic human wants as that for peace become falsified into expressions of private comfort and are rendered habitual to millions of magazine readers as merchandising slogans? Why should people settle their social problems by action and sacrifice if they can serve the same ends by drinking a new brand of beer? To the casual observer the advertisement is nothing but a more or less clever sales trick. From the aspect of a more critical analysis, it becomes a dangerous sign of what a promotional culture might end up with. (Lazarsfeld, 1941: 11)

In concluding this early paper, Lazarsfeld called for studies that attempt to leverage the benefits of administrative and critical approaches, while at the same time registering that the introduction of critical approaches might not be easy. We should, nonetheless, ‘learn to be hospitable to criticism and find forms in which more patience can be exercised to wait and, in the end, to see what is constructive and what is not’ (Lazarsfeld, 1941: 14).

Moving closer to the present, as a critique of business marketing in the 1960s and 1970s we could turn to ‘reconstructionist’ marketing scholars, as these come close to adopting a limit attitude in the sense discussed above. The two other categories that Arnold and Fisher (1996) detail are, by contrast, the apologists who refused to listen to any critique of marketing as contributing to social ills, preferring instead to emphasise the economic benefits of marketing activities and the social marketers who exhibited little tension in using marketing tools and techniques to promote social behavioural change. In the case of the social marketers, Arnold and Fisher write, ‘These scholars placed less emphasis than the reconstructionists on redefining the nature of marketing, which they viewed as primarily a management technology’ (Arnold and Fisher, 1996: 126).

Diverging from the above two groups, the reconstructionists sought to rethink marketing activities and core marketing values in light of the ‘social concerns for the general welfare of society, the consequences of ecological ambivalence, [and] the awareness of ethical dimensions of resource-use decisions’ (Arnold and Fisher, 1996: 130). It was this group that
attempted to provide a ‘thoroughgoing critique or reconceptualization of the fundamental nature of marketing’, registering the charges that marketing promoted materialism and environmental despoliation.

This form of critique still remains limited. The reconstructionists, in the form of Kotler and Levy [1969] among others, still remain within what Kilbourne et al. in their discussion of ‘critical macromarketing’ have called the dominant social paradigm. This refers to ‘a society’s belief structure that organizes the way people perceive and interpret the functioning of the world around them’ [Kilbourne et al., 1997: 4]. Central to the dominant social paradigm in Western economies is an ideology of consumption, a faith in technology to avert environmental destruction, support for liberal democracy, defence of private property ownership, free markets and limited government intervention in the economy (Kilbourne et al., 2002). What Kilbourne et al. [1997] mean when they refer to an ideology of consumption is that people view their quality of life in terms of their ability to consume ever greater quantities of goods. In other words, they are materialistic in orientation.

According to Spratlen [1972] the broadening of the concept of marketing does not actually involve any substantive change in marketing’s relationship to society. Social costs, ‘externalities, conservation in the use of resources, and other “macro,” environmental and humanistic concerns’ are still marginalised [Spratlen, 1972: 405]. Instead, he calls for marketing to take a humanistic turn, balancing managerial, technical interests with ‘greater humaneness (passionate concern for life-enriching qualities), responsibility (acceptance of obligations imposed by [the] consequences of marketing decisions), and rationality (openness to examination, experimentation and change in order to gain new insights in marketing thought and action)’ [Spratlen, 1972: 408].

By contrast, more explicitly critical orientations attempt to deposition any exclusive focus on a managerial orientation, along with the usual ‘positivistic’ emphasis on predicting and controlling consumer behaviour, while attempting, at the same time, to move beyond the dominant social paradigm [e.g. Dholakia and Firat, 1980; Firat 1985; Hetrick and Lozada, 1999; Holbrook, 1985; Monieson, 1981]. Given that the critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School is most often mentioned in connection with this form of critical reflection on marketing, it is appropriate to briefly consider what exactly critical theory refers to using Horkheimer’s classic position piece.

**Critical Theory**

As Horkheimer [1972] would see it, the task of a critical theory is to scrutinise present reality indicating, for example, how industrial production does not necessarily serve the interests of the majority. This would thereby problematise the equality of exchange relationships that form the ideological basis of the capitalist system (and, in turn, marketing),
highlighting how these serve the profit interests of a small minority whose interests continue to be reaffirmed by property relations. As Horkheimer (1972: 207) puts it,

The aim of this activity is not simply to eliminate one or another abuse, for it regards such abuses as necessarily connected with the way in which the social structure is organized. Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not, either in conscious intention or in its objective significance, the better functioning of any element in the structure. On the contrary it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order, and refuses to take them as nonscientific presuppositions about which one can do nothing.

While there have been a number of studies that aimed to promote the use of critical theory in marketing (Burton, 2001, 2003; Hetrick and Lozada, 1994; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Kilbourne, 1992, 1995, 2002; Morgan, 1992, 2003; Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Rogers, 1987), it remains the case that this paradigm continues to be under-utilised by the marketing academy. One reason given for this is that consumer researchers were interested in producing research that was ‘fun’ rather than being intent on ‘making the world better’ (Kernan, 1995: 553).

Broadly speaking, research inspired by critical theory assumes that social reality is socially manufactured, but asserts that individual consciousness is dominated and subservient to ideological superstructures. Critique in this case functions in ‘unmasking’ inequalities in exchange relationships (Horkheimer, 1972), questioning the privileging of ‘having’, that is consuming, over ‘being’ and relatedness to the world (Fromm, 1976/2007), scrutinising the role of marketing and advertising in the repression of individuality and the expansiveness of human existence (Adorno, 1989; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Marcuse, 1964/1972), highlighting the importance of advertising and marketing as socialisation agents and drawing implications for public policy from this (Klein and Leiss, 1978; Leiss, 1983), developing a critical theory of needs (Leiss, 1978), critiquing the emergence of the marketing character and the failure to articulate humanist alternatives (Fromm, 1976/2007, 1998) and more generally in providing an extensive critical analysis of science, truth and objectivity (Habermas, 1968/1987, 1990; Horkheimer, 1947/2004). The ultimate goal of critique in this sense was to fuel positive social transformation (Leiss, 1978; Marcuse, 1964/1972).

**Critical Marketing Thought**

Taking a somewhat similar approach to that of the critical theorists Firat, Venkatesh and Dholakia have been central contributors to the development of critical marketing. As Firat [1985] noted some time ago, critique is beneficial for the discipline. Self-criticism of
marketing and consumer research will, he argues, ‘contribute to the discipline’s growth’ (Firat, 1985: 3). Nonetheless, marketing, Firat and Dholakia stressed, lacked a critical perspective. The implication of this was that any analysis of ‘marketing phenomena has stopped at those explanatory boundaries which represent the ideologically accepted limits of knowledge. Probes into the dominant values, ideologies, worldviews, and institutions affecting marketing are conspicuous by their absence’ (Firat and Dholakia, 1982: 14). Continuing in this vein they suggest: ‘An analytical and critical understanding of the marketing system may open new and provocative avenues in the study of the human condition’ (Firat and Dholakia, 1982: 14).

Marketing and consumer research, they maintain, uncritically supports the existing structure of consumption, serves ‘techno-managerial’ interests and focuses on consumer behaviour ‘only when the consumer enters a buying situation in the market’. In addition, they assert that marketing scholarship reifies certain concepts such as consumer ‘needs’, rather than subjecting them to critical scrutiny. What this means in practice is that the category of the ‘consumer’ (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), a concept like consumer ‘needs’ (Firat, 1985; Leiss, 1978), an assumption such as ‘consumer choice’ (Dholakia and Dholakia, 1985) or specific consumption imagery (Holt, 2003) should be scrutinised much like concepts of ‘freedom’ (Horkheimer, 1966), ‘static and dynamic’ (Adorno, 1961) and ‘revolution’ (Marcuse, 1968) were analysed by the critical theorists.

To take one example, Firat notes that an individual is typically represented in mainstream marketing texts as a homo-consumicus, whose needs are depicted as innate to human nature (Firat, 1985; see Jones and Monieson, 1990: 110). The problem with this view is clearly that if all human needs are innate to the individual then what is the role of marketing in society? It would surely relegate marketers to simply identifying consumer needs and then producing the requisite products commensurate with these requirements (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002). Marketing, arguably, functions more as a ‘facilitator’ of consumerism (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2007).

On a more critical note, Firat diagnoses a clear omission in such a conceptualisation of the consumer. There is, he adds, little mention of how certain consumption patterns (e.g. the use of private-transportation) in society are structured by interconnected choices made at the political level (i.e. lobbying by business interests), ‘at the level of production [what to produce], distribution [how to allocate the products within society], information dissemination [how is the existence of products going to be communicated?], and pricing [at what cost will the exchange take place?]’ (Firat, 1977: 291).

This concentration on the individual consumer thereby ignores the more aggregate structures that influence consumption. More macro-level consumption research is thus desirable which would incorporate ‘discussion of the social and cultural determinants of individual psychology’, for instance (Leiss, 1978: 43). Pointing in this direction, Firat argues that other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology develop macro-theories that present a ‘system perspective for the phenomenon in its entirety’, and use these
as the basis for developing micro-theories consistent with those developed by scholars schooled in the interpretive research tradition. Lears (1985) is even more critical of research that focuses on individual consumption behaviour. He, like Leiss (1978) and Klein and Leiss (1978), calls for studies that ‘target the systemic features of consumer culture – the pressures organized to promote a way of life characterized by getting and spending, at the expense of human and natural resources, for the primary benefit of a managerial elite’.

Despite the fact that critical approaches to marketing and consumer research still remain marginal, the clarion calls for critical approaches are easily discernible. There are scholars who explicitly assert the value of critical marketing (Benton, 1985; Desmond, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 1982; Hansen, 1981; Monieson, 1988), critical consumer research (Belk, 1995; Dholakia and Firat, 1980), critical macromarketing (Kilbourne et al., 1997), structuration-ideology analysis (Schneiderman, 1998; Williamson, 1978), analyses of consumer culture that draw upon rhetorical, iconographic and cultural-historical approaches (Lears, 1985), critical hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994), Marxist and feminist critiques of consumer research (Hirschman, 1993), Liberal feminism, women’s voice/experience feminism, poststructuralist feminism and consumer research (Bristor and Fischer, 1993), critical ecofeminism (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001), feminist poststructuralist critiques of exchange relationships (Fischer and Bristor, 1994), feminist reflection on the problems raised by the incorporation of feminist theory in consumer research (Bristor and Fischer, 1995) and calls for a return to materialist feminism (Catterall et al., 2005).

The range of critical perspectives that have been used to examine marketing phenomena also include Marxist critiques of advertising (Lee and Murray, 1995), Post-Marxist perspectives on green marketing (Prothero and Fitchett, 2000), autonomist Marxist interpretations of branding (Arvidsson, 2005), Postmodern Marxist interpretations of consumer behaviour (Pietrykowski, 2007), dialectical and negation critiques of the structuring of consumer behaviour (Dholakia and Firat, 1980), Foucauldian consumption studies (Humphreys, 2006; Rosengarten, 2004; Shankar et al., 2006), Foucauldian non-consumption studies (Moisander and Personen, 2002), Foucauldian histories of marketing thought (Tadajewski, 2006a, 2006b), Bachelardian consumption studies (Lane, 2006), literary-critical interpretations of marketing theory (Stern, 1990), deconstruction and consumer research (Stern, 1996; Thompson, 1993), radical deconstruction and economic development (Joy and Ross, 1989), poststructuralist consumer research (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995), explanations of the evolution of critical theory (Poster and Venkatesh, 1987), critical theory and marketing education (Benton, 1985), critical theoretical interpretations of consumer behaviour (Alvesson, 1994; Burton, 2002; Hetrick and Lozada, 1994; Klein and Leiss, 1978; Leiss, 1978; Murray and Ozanne, 1991, 2006; Ozanne and Murray, 1995; Rogers, 1987; Schipper, 2002; Shankar and Fitchett, 2002; Varman and Vikas, 2007; Vikas and Varman, 2007; Wright and Shapiro, 1992),

The value of ‘radical’ approaches, suggest Joy and Ross [1989: 27], is that ‘they allow us to question and challenge the very premises and assumptions of marketing, as well as explore other alternatives for generating new ideas’. Again, Firat [1988a] has examined the place of marketing in capitalist society and the way in which certain features of marketing discourse work to structure and delimit consumption options [see also Klein and Leiss, 1978; Leiss, 1978]. Taking the concept of consumer ‘need’ he works through a careful analysis that destabilises existing conceptualisations of need in society by showing how what is needed is structured by ecological, cultural and historical human experience.

One simple example used by Firat will suffice to provide a flavour of his work in this area. He suggests that we reflect on the nature of movement in advanced industrial society. Moving from one city to another, he asserts, reveals certain structural features that delimit possible life choices – a so-called ‘political economy of social choice’ [Dholakia et al., 1980: 28]. Using a sample of three communities in the US, he writes, ‘public transportation is either nonexistent or thoroughly inadequate. Consequently, this consumer unit is left with little choice but to buy a car’ [Firat, 1988b: 290]. There may be other options for the consumer in this example but these carry certain social, psychological and economic costs that are ameliorated by the use of a car. Is the ownership of a car in this example a real, authentic need or is it an indulgence, an irrational need that does not really require satisfaction, Firat rhetorically asks? No. Where the behaviours of consumers are so constrained by systemic logic it makes little sense to call such behaviour irrational, at an individual level.

What does make sense, he avows, is that marketing scholars continue to examine the way that the market system has come to be structured in the manner that it appears and the role that marketers play in reproducing the systemic logic that delimits the life choices that consumers can make. Firat writes, ‘we need to seek to understand how phenomena interacted historically to produce the present conditions that surround us’ [Firat, 1988a: 102]. Only then can marketing scholars contribute to thinking about how marketing could work otherwise, and what interests we may want to promote over those of capital reproduction that the dominant managerialist emphasis at present supports [Firat, 1988a, 1988b].

If we are to pull two key arguments from the foregoing discussion, what we must register is that the interaction between individual consumer life choices and social, political and economic forces will invariably be complex and should not be judged positively or negatively on an a priori basis. The most useful way we can approach consumer behaviour and the marketing system therefore, would be from a postmoralist position. By this we mean that, as students and researchers, we should not celebrate consumer culture in an uncritical fashion [Schudson, 2007], but examine it critically, identifying its benefits and costs.
So, to summarise our position: we do not think that marketing theory and practice will cohere into a critical marketing ‘theory’ (Burton, 2001). The commonality that we perceive amongst the diverse range of perspectives gestured toward above is that they take critical perspectives on marketing to involve a continual effort to question the self-evidences that are concretised as the boundaries of marketing or as ‘appropriate’ contributions to marketing thought. Connected with this, is the recognition of the historicity of marketing theory and practice. Critical marketing cannot thus be equated with one brand of critical thought. It is better conceived in terms of an ethos or an attitude. We think of it as a ‘critique of what we are’ which is ‘at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them’ (Foucault, 1984: 50).

Each of the various approaches above has attempted to do this in some way and each would articulate their own way of critically engaging with marketing. To avoid closing down the boundaries of what critical marketing might be, we would venture that to be engaged in ‘critical marketing’ is to explicitly question hegemonic modes of thought wherever they appear, even if they emerge from scholars interested in critical marketing. Offering alternative views that explicitly question authorities of any kind will not be easy. Even so, it should be done. As Said (1996) argues, the function of the intellectual in our society is to dare to speak the truth to power, even though this might lead to criticism of the individual commentator (see also Foucault, 2001).

**Critical Marketing as an Emancipatory Social Science?**

It is probably a little early to argue that critical marketing could contribute to emancipation, if by emancipation we are going to describe a programme that points out the kinds of changes needed in market economies in order to eliminate oppression and exploitation. We would hope that critical marketing and transformative consumer research would have a part to play in moving society towards a state where the minority do not have to subsidise their lifestyles by means of the exploitation of the majority. We are only beginning to develop a sense of how the critical marketing agenda has started to be conceived. Currently, it would be fair to say that it is at stage one of Erik Olin Wright’s (2006) sketch of the tasks of an emancipatory social science. These entail: ‘first, to elaborate a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists; second, to envisage viable alternatives; and third, to understand the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation’ (Wright, 2006: 94).

Fleshing this out further, an emancipatory oriented critical marketing will begin by diagnosing what is wrong with the present conception of marketing and what we would need to do to rectify this. It then provides a critique of the relationship between marketing and society and why we need to reconfigure this beyond the boundaries of the existing social
paradigm – not within it. To be able to reconfigure the marketing system, we would need a number of viable alternatives for the reconstruction of the marketing–society relationship. Finally we require a ‘theory of transformation that tells us how to get from here [the present status quo] to there a viable, sustainable world’ [Wright, 2006: 99]. Critical marketing cannot, realistically, hope to accomplish all of these steps without moving beyond the disciplinary boundaries of marketing and consumer research.

There will need to be a concerted effort by scholars to move beyond their disciplinary comfort zones to develop the solutions to the problems that continue to plague society and for which marketing is partly responsible. Here critical marketing scholars could work productively with those involved with the ‘Real Utopias Project’ in economics. This group of interdisciplinary scholars aims to question the extent to which the market can be supplemented or supplanted with alternative ways of organising exchanges between people. The Real Utopias Project aims to stimulate ‘serious discussion of radical alternatives to existing institutions. The objective is to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions rather than on vague, abstract practices’ [Wright, 1998: x]. It aims to offer specific guidelines about how markets and property relations could be recast, in order to foster more egalitarian relations between people. Marketing, surely, has some role to play here. Whether scholars take up this call, only time will tell; emancipation for critical marketing will remain, nonetheless, never a final end in itself. It, like any critical marketing project, is an ongoing process [Brownlie, 2006].

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have attempted to indicate our interpretation of what constitutes critical marketing. While we appreciate the value of the criteria that Fournier and Grey [2000] sketched out for critical management studies, at this stage much of the critical literature in marketing would not cohere completely with the standards they articulate. This is not to say that marketing does not have a substantial body of critical marketing scholarship, far from it.

In writing this chapter and producing this book we would like to think that individuals of any philosophical or political persuasion will be willing to feed off the ideas generated by scholars with different paradigmatic viewpoints to their own [Arnould and Thompson, 2005]. This said, rather than assuming that marketing theory will end up at some consensus position, we should acknowledge that there will always be a certain degree of antagonism between people with diverse research and practical interests.

If we are serious about pluralism in marketing – and scholars from across the discipline seem to indicate that they are – we can expect nothing less. As Chantal Mouffe has argued, ‘one cannot take seriously the existence of a plurality of values without recognizing they will conflict. And this conflict cannot be visualized merely in terms of competing
interests that could be adjudicated or accommodated without any form of violence. Many conflicts are antagonistic because they take place among conflicting interpretations of the ethico-political values embodied in liberal democratic institutions' (Mouffe, 1996: 8). As the democratic process will never run smoothly without dispute, we cannot ever expect marketing theory or practice to do so either. And it is for this reason that the field of critical marketing can never be easily defined, as some would like to do (e.g. Saren et al., 2007).

Notes

1. The reader is probably horrified that such a mistake could be made so early on in the collection. The usual gesture here would be to point to the case of the Pillsbury Company (e.g. Keith, 1960) and their turn to the marketing concept in the 1950s and argue as Vargo and Lusch (2004) and Vargo and Morgan (2005) incorrectly do, that the marketing concept and marketing management functions appear during this period. The idea that the marketing concept emerges in the 1950s is completely incorrect. Close readers of the work of Borsch (1958) or especially McKittrick (1957) would have noted that both make the case that themes associated with the marketing concept are found routinely in the 1920s and 1930s. McKittrick (1957) even explicitly points to the work of Oswald Knauth (1948, 1956) who frequently uses similar language regarding exchange relationships to that found in the relationship marketing literature and discussions of the marketing concept. Coolen (1960/1978), Fullerton (1988), Hollander (1986), Jones and Richardson (2007), Tadajewski (2008, 2009), Tadajewski and Saren (2008) and Tadajewski and Jones (2008) all develop this point further.

2. Given space limitations we do not include a discussion of the critiques levelled at marketing practice by Marx, Lenin, Veblen, C.W. Mills, or Galbraith.

References


