

# **Critical Reflections on the Marketing Concept and Consumer Sovereignty**

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## **Introduction**

At its most basic, we can understand critical marketing studies as interested in challenging the status quo, that is, it questions the way marketing activities are represented by academics and observers interested in legitimising the role of marketing in society (Tadajewski, 2010a). When scholars legitimise – when they justify and underline only the positive contributions made by marketing scholarship and practice – they present a partial and distorted image of the discipline and the practical effects of this group on the world around them. Critical marketing does not necessarily deny the contributions marketing can make to the quality of life some people enjoy. Rather, it asks us to consider all of the ramifications of marketing, including its praiseworthy and negative effects.

Research adopting a critical marketing perspective has often been undertaken via close readings of key marketing concepts. Typically, the question being asked is whether they accurately represent what practitioners do in reality. Put differently, critical marketing accounts highlight the disparities and inequity inherent in the capitalist system. This representation of marketplace reality is juxtaposed against the ‘equality’ (Bagozzi, 1975) or ‘win-win’ (Gummesson, 1999) arguments all too frequently found in mainstream perspectives which claim that all benefit from marketplace exchange. These are false generalisations which do not stand up well when juxtaposed against the lived experiences of various groups (Falchetti, Ponchio, & Botelho, 2016).

Nor are the marketing concepts being taught in business schools neutral ways of describing the world. They represent the views of specific interest groups constituted by people who have a reason for describing the world in certain ways and not others. Marketing concepts, like relationship marketing, present the activities of practitioners in positive terms. As such, we might want to view them as counterpoints to the accusations of manipulation that are frequently targeted at the discipline and practice. Indeed, academics are often explicit in presenting their work as a response to depictions of the discipline which position it as a detrimental force in the social world (O’Donohoe, 1994).

So, marketing theory, the concepts which accompany it, and the practices associated with the subject, are all political, rather than neutral. They are fundamentally concerned with encouraging people to think about their existence in circumscribed ways. At the most basic level, the logic of marketing is driven by consumption. When we look at any textbook or mainstream journal article the refrain is almost identical. Practitioners are praised for enabling people to access a vast array of goods and services; marketing’s role as a mechanism of information gathering and distribution is applauded; and its function in manufacturing demand (Webster, Malter, & Ganesan, 2005) is linked to job creation and contributions to gross domestic product (Wilkie & Moore, 1999). Those who represent marketing in this way are not nefarious characters. They are advocates for their beliefs. It is when this affirmation leads to the elision of the dark-side of marketing practice that we should be concerned. When we focus on the beneficial contributions of an academic discipline or industry practice, we often fail to pay attention to alternative ways of thinking about how the economic system could function; ways that hold out the potential to benefit more people, more equally, than present methods of providing goods and services.

Questioning the role of marketing in society is an exercise in ‘ontological denaturalisation’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000). This grand term simply refers to the fact that we do not take the

present representation of marketing or the current economic ordering of society as the only way we can think about it. When we denaturalise something, we make it seem less natural. We stop taking it for granted. We ask questions about how the economic system has taken the shape it has, how it was constructed, by whom, and for what purpose. Importantly, we focus on the issue of who benefits from existing marketing and distribution methods. This encourages us to think about the economic system in terms of power relationships. Given the present structure of the economic system, who is really in the driving-seat? Do consumers really direct producers? Do manufacturers really listen to the consumer and produce what they need and want? Or do they try to shape human behaviour by creating and stimulating desire?

Of course, asking questions about power relations can sound negative. To some extent this is accurate. When we look at the marketplace, critical research often finds that the consumer is not as powerful as mainstream scholars like to claim. Even so, the fact that we are seeking to engage in ontological denaturalisation means that we are effectively assuming that the power relations that shape producer and consumer behaviour can be changed. Critical marketing studies is therefore underwritten by an optimism that all too often passes unacknowledged.

If our current reality (our ontology) is not predetermined, then alternatives are available and possible (i.e. we can make the world look unnatural and change subsequently becomes more desirable). In other words, the extant economic and marketing system is not, from the perspective of critical marketing, necessarily the best way of achieving our distribution and provisioning requirements. Accepting this, we must continue to treat marketing theory, its associated concepts and the practical activities of business people with a sceptical eye, asking whether they are preventing us from thinking differently or working in ways more consistent with the aim of achieving distributive justice for all.

This chapter engages with mainstream concepts in marketing – the marketing concept, consumer sovereignty and exchange. We will leverage our understanding to offer a critical evaluation of their assumptions and effects in practice. As any new student is told, marketing goes back many thousands of years. As a university subject, its history is more recent. It is a product of the early twentieth century. When approaching the development of marketing we need to be on our guard. Misrepresentation is rife. It is frequently accompanied by a very positive narrative which basically refers to the various ways in which practitioners seek to assist the consumer. Reading these accounts, one would be hard pressed to understand why marketing practice has ever been presented in negative terms (i.e. as selling snake-oil or engaging in hard-selling). In this chapter we will remove our tinted glasses and look at the marketing system with fresh, critical eyes.

### **The Marketing Concept, Drucker and Keith**

In many accounts marketing moves through a trajectory that runs as follows. Practitioners once adhered to a production orientation. They produced what they could make efficiently and cheaply. They subsequently shifted to a sales orientation. They devoted a bit more attention to the customer, rather than churning out what the firm could produce and sometimes undertook a limited amount of market research. This sales orientation could lead to hard-selling, to people pushing products aggressively irrespective of whether it was an intelligent strategy. Eventually, business people – so the progressive narrative goes (Hollander, 1986) – registered their error and saw the light of the marketing concept (but the previous concepts continue to co-exist with the marketing concept). To pinch a line from Daniel Defoe (a writer in the eighteenth century), the marketing concept assumes that the

customer is the idol of business enterprise. They are the focus around which practitioners' orbit (Keith, 1960). The firm is not the powerful actor here, reaping all the benefits.

Pretty much any textbook that is consulted will present the above historical narrative as leading to a specific turning point when practitioners saw the light of customer centrality. The 1950s are the turning point that is most frequently cited. But, as gestured above, related ideas can be found in the literature from the eighteenth century. Even so, the 1950s did herald a time when there was considerable attention devoted to the idea of 'creating a customer' (Drucker, 1954, p. 39) who is sold products and services to meet organisational needs for profit (Drucker, 1954, p. 45). The reasoning for this attention is easy to understand. In the post-World War II period, people were experiencing considerable levels of affluence. They had more money, more options clamouring for their attention, and this encouraged manufacturers and retailers to focus on what their customer base wanted rather than assuming that people would buy whatever was placed on shop shelves.

Usually, the marketing concept is associated with Keith's (1960) reflections on the rise of marketing at Pillsbury (the bakery products company). This is not accurate in various ways. At that juncture, there were other companies pursuing commensurate strategies. General Electric is often cited in this regard. Keith, however, was an articulate exponent of the marketing concept, promoting this in a major journal. He stressed the reversal of power relations between marketer and consumer, explaining that customers are the more powerful partner in an exchange relationship. Their needs and desires should be preeminent; their purchasing helps ensure corporate longevity; and companies needed to appreciate this shift. Practitioners, in other words, were told to look at their businesses from the customer's point of view. Were their offerings likely to appeal to their market? Was the product a financially viable proposition for the firm? Marketers sometimes get these questions badly wrong (Hult et al., 2017).

But the marketing concept was not the end-point. 'Marketing control' was the terminal station. This was where marketing directed short- and long-term decisions that had to be taken within the firm. It basically meant that marketing was the most important specialism in the company. It controlled and directed all others (e.g. it was more powerful than production, accounting and so forth). In presenting his argument, Keith wanted to ensure that marketing had influence within the firm. Naturally, organisations are not monolithic entities. They are constituted by various groups – production, engineering, purchasing, finance, accounting and credit – each of whom has different political objectives which lead to 'organizational conflicts between marketing and other departments' (Kotler, 1967, p. 139). These groups can hinder the implementation of the marketing concept (cf. Meyerson, 2008, pp. 19-20, 74, 94; Nader, 1972, pp. 180-181, 210-211). The same is true of staff members whether they are designated as marketers or not. Those at the coalface are paid relatively little, can be apathetic about their work and have minimal power or responsibility to resolve complaints or problems (Harris, 1998). Alongside these issues, their lack of product knowledge and poor managerial guidance can all work to undermine the implementation of the marketing concept (Harris, 1998).

To make matters more complicated, the actual position of marketing professionals within firms is contested (Webster et al., 2005). It is easy to decrease the credibility of marketing inside the organisation by asking its advocates to demonstrate their contribution to profit, market share and shareholder value. This made the status of marketing within the C-suite (i.e. the top rungs of the firm) precarious, even when related activities are permeating organisations (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). Notwithstanding these worries, recent publications have empirically determined that companies with senior marketing positions (i.e.

Chief Marketing Officer) do demonstrate performance gains, sometimes quite substantial gains in terms of stock market valuations over firms without related roles (Germann et al., 2015).

Robert Keith did provide practitioners with a narrative to help them displace other internal actors. His arguments continue to be used. It was not appropriate – he claims – for decisions to be made without marketing having a substantial input into decision-making. If marketing was the ‘voice of the customer’ and satisfying the consumer was the key to success, then its organisational voice demanded priority. Destabilising company power relations, reshaping them in a way conducive to the needs of marketing management, was the hand trying to be dealt here.

### **Legitimizing Marketing Practice, Further Delegitimizing Priority Claims**

Keith’s work has been central to the ideological legitimization of marketing. It distances the practice from lay interpretations of selling (i.e. pushing products on to reluctant buyers). We should appreciate that this account has been questioned from multiple perspectives. In historical terms, using Keith’s argument to suggest that the 1950s witnessed the emergence of the marketing concept is incorrect. Eighteenth century manufacturers like Matthew Boulton engaged in practices akin to relationship marketing, segmented their markets and used marketing communications (Robinson, 1963). Josiah Wedgwood was adept on the marketing front. He used a large range of marketing communications, patented his products, employed sales men who travelled all over the world and provided refunds if people were dissatisfied (McKendrick, 1960).

Canadian practitioners in the 1880s focused on the customer, wanted to form long-term relationships with their clients, were attentive to profit generation and engaged in market segmentation (Jones & Richardson, 2007). Those individuals thinking about and practicing various aspects of marketing in the early twentieth century articulated related ideas. Their analytic focus was slightly more sophisticated in the sense that they undermined the way some authors represented the female customer as irrational. Lillian Gilbreth, for example, portrayed female consumers as rational and intelligent (Graham, 2013). She called for practitioners to adopt the marketing concept and undertake research to inform product development, so that their offerings were consistent with the requirements of their audience. Pauline Arnold echoed this perspective (Jones, 2013). So, these ideas were not original to Robert Keith, Peter Drucker, Wendall Smith, Philip Kotler or Evert Gummesson.

We should add that the practices Keith enumerates at Pillsbury were only a partial representation of what the company was doing. Some of their activities were not pro-customer. They engaged in collusion to try to control the prices of certain ingredients essential to the manufacture of their bread products. This is price-fixing not being customer focused (Tadajewski, 2010b). This was not restricted to Pillsbury. For some companies, it seems like the law is treated as optional. It is used when it advances corporate interests, and ignored when it fetters revenues.

Price-fixing and a host of other problematic practices such as ignoring environmental legislation which forbids pollution continue to the present day (e.g. Greenwald, 2005). They will be a feature of business activities while there are minimal repercussions accompanying them. We do not need to look far to find further examples of poor practices (e.g. Nader, 1972; Sinclair, 1906/2010; Veblen, 1919/2005, 1921/2006). As a case in point, the pharmaceutical industry came under sustained attack during the late 1950s, early 1960s for dubious claims of efficacy, price gouging, excessive promotional spending, use of brand names to obscure non-existent product differences, and the creation of ‘customer confusion’ (Pressey, 2015). They

exemplified the monopoly power and corporate ethical intransigence that critics like J.K. Galbraith, activists such as Senator Estes Kefauver, and later Ralph Nader (1972), lamented and tried to eradicate.

Keith also claims generalisability for his thesis about a 'marketing revolution' taking place at Pillsbury and across the wider business community. Claims like these need to be tempered. After all production, sales and technology orientations continue to be practiced today (Webster et al., 2005). In equal measure, the idea that marketing has distanced itself from a selling orientation is dubious. Borch (1958) maintained that business practice should combine marketing and selling orientations. There was no point, he suggested, in listening to customers and developing desirable products, if they fail to communicate this fact. His argument, however, was not subject to much discussion. It was too close to views about marketing as a manipulative activity. Still, his ideas have been resurrected in modified form with the attention given to 'market-driving' and 'market-shaping' (Jaworski, Kohli, & Sahay, 2000) (the latter operates more at a political-level, lobbying government to enact legislation to facilitate the operation of marketing. Kotler (1986) terms this 'mega-marketing').

These new concepts (market-driving and shaping) are meant to sensitise practitioners to move beyond being reactive, that is, continuing to perform a purist version of the marketing concept. An extreme level of customer focus is dangerous in a turbulent, competitive marketplace. People are notoriously bad at discussing their present needs, never mind those they may have in five or ten years (Hildebrand, 1951). Responsiveness to the customer is thus downplayed in current debates; stimulus is underlined. Markets and consumers are nudged in directions deemed most attractive for the firm. From this perspective, marketers are a generative force in society (Kumar, Scheer, & Kotler, 2000).

Market driving is predicated on dramatic innovation. Companies that achieve it (and it is rare) reshape their industry and (they hope) consumer subjectivity. In many cases, it involves young firms that are new to the market who do not test their ideas using traditional research methods. They literally drive the market (i.e. like a rancher drives cattle). They communicate their vision about how the industry could be different. To bring this vision into reality, they organise their production and distribution to help them achieve their objectives, often in ways that differentiate them markedly from their competitors. This is not differentiation for the sake of it. It should enable the company to provide something of value to the customer (i.e. more convenient distribution and better access to products and services; lower prices etc). IKEA is an example; Swatch is another. Nike did something similar courtesy of 'word of foot' advertising (Knight, 2016) (i.e. where people would see high performance athletes using their products and want to buy them).

These debates point to an important tension in marketing theory and practice. Where does the power lie? Is it with the marketer or consumer? Marketers tend to claim that the consumer is powerful. Their actual practice does not necessarily lend support to their claims. When we look back in history, for example, the eighteenth century economist, Adam Smith, pointed out that seeing business people meeting together was not a good omen. It meant they were colluding (like Pillsbury), seeking to maximise the benefits they derived from the market, usually to the detriment of the consumer.

Thorstein Veblen, a critically oriented economist writing in the early twentieth century, casts business in a darker light than managerially minded practitioners like Keith. He did appreciate some of the benefits that the system of industry had provided (i.e. wider access to standardised goods and services at lower prices); but he was aware of the problems that accompanied the pursuit of profit (Plotkin, 2014). He realised producers did not always have

the consumers' best interests in mind. They liked to restrict output to increase prices. Veblen (1919/2005) called this sabotage. Connected to this, they had to make their goods look scarcer than they really were. Limited supply and brand differentiation helped here (Plotkin, 2014). The development of brands, evocative symbolism and tiny points of difference made it harder for the buyer to objectively weigh up the benefits the product promised to deliver. Underscoring the importance of brand image and symbolism, rather than quality and price, complicated decision-making processes. Over time, we focus on the symbolism as the most salient aspect of marketing, buying products for subjective distinction. To ensure they sold their highly-priced goods, manufacturers and retailers used the tools of advertising and salesmanship to manufacture demand. Sometimes these added 50% on to the actual production costs of the product (Jones & Tadjewski, 2018).

For Veblen, we can say that marketing was not a force for the creation of satisfaction. His arguments stand in marked contrast to the idea that business people listen to the consumer, react to the information elicited, and develop goods and services which aim to satisfy. Veblen reverses these power relations. Start with the pursuit of profit and treat this as the motive force. Business will do whatever is necessary to secure the returns it wants. That is the nub of his work. From his perspective, marketing and the actors who help operationalise its varied practices, mould demand which was then satisfied. To do this they use marketing communications. Advertising shapes subjectivity; it tries to cognitively confine our patterns of thought; to make non-functional attributes resonate; and foster the perception that marketing, advertising and symbolic manipulation are our routes to happiness. This is the 'web' that surrounds us (Plotkin, 2014). This is somewhat consistent with James Rorty's (1934) critique of the advertising system.

Rorty was more emotive in his questioning of capitalism. This is reflected in his conceptualisation of the consumer as a 'sucker', someone who is easily primed by the advertising, movies and cultural industries to live and think in predefined terms. The critical theorists make related arguments. In many respects, there is a lot of similarity between their view of the impact of marketing on society and that articulated by James Rorty. The critical theorists sought to examine how people in a specific historical period – the first generation of thinkers in this vein were publishing between 1930 and the late 1960s – were socialised by various influences. By socialisation we mean how people are told to act in a cultural environment. Our behaviour, the critical theorists explain, is shaped by multiple factors that we often only dimly appreciate.

Put differently, we are not the monarchs of the marketplace (Adorno, 1991). Nor do we embody the characteristics of economic (rational) 'man' (Fromm, 2002). Both concepts are 'fabrications' that help support the capitalist status quo by making it appear that the economic system reflects human nature and accommodates our real needs (Fromm, 2002, p. 74). We are not in any substantive sense an isolated, self-directed individual who determines our own route through life (Horkheimer, 2004, p. 92). We exist within interconnected economic and cultural systems that dwarf and define the individual in terms of providing the opportunity to earn income (the economic system) as well as templates for living (the cultural system) (Fromm, 2002). Nor do we make consumption choices without the input of other actors into our decision-making. Looking at the changing nature of the social environment, the critical theorists registered that the traditional mechanisms of orienting people to the world such as religion and the family were becoming less significant because of the rise of the 'culture industries' (Horkheimer, 2004). This latter term refers to all those industries who were involved with shaping the cultural environment, with fostering certain ways of life that are predicated on high levels of consumption (Adorno, 1991).

Marketing, advertising and the lifestyles of the rich and famous were often features of their analyses (e.g. Lowenthal, 1961). Each of these helps shape the cultural climate that surrounds us, thereby impacting upon our processes of psychological adjustment (i.e. they tend to foster conformity) (see also Veblen, 1899/1994). As Horkheimer puts it, ‘Motion pictures, the radio, popular biographies and novels have the same refrain: This is our groove, this is the rut of the great and the would-be great – this is reality as it is and should be and will be’ (Horkheimer, 2004, p. 96; see also Horkheimer, 2004, p. 107-108). This is where the critical theorists – at least in some of their writings (especially the work of Fromm, somewhat in Marcuse, and less so in certain aspects of Adorno’s work) connect with Rorty. They make the case that marketing and the culture industries are powerful forces: ‘The customer is not king’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 99). Their writing often makes it seem like the consumer is relatively powerless compared to marketers. Fromm (2001), for instance, describes the advertising and selling of consumption items as akin to the marketing of opiates. We cannot or do not want to resist them.

Marketing practice uses advertising and other communications mediums to increase the value attributed to the enjoyments and satisfactions that accompany market-based buying and consumption. These mechanisms – marketing, distribution, and exchange – help integrate people into the economic system through their consumption of a largely ‘standardized’ set of offerings (Adorno, 1991) which are determined – at best – via consumer participation in market research. This drives corporate decision-making based on what Horkheimer (2004, p. 21) calls ‘the majority principle’, whereby majority decisions shape marketplace offerings and define the parameters within which people tend to conform (Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) render this in more specific terms in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by gesturing to a rudimentary form of market segmentation).

Eventually people start to see their life through the prism of the accumulation of consumer goods (Marcuse, 1964). This, in turn, had implications for human self-development and the cultivation of individuality (cf. Fromm, 2002, p. 15). Looking to the market for inspiration about how we should live our lives and what we should deem desirable entails a certain degree of homogenisation. People take what the market provides, using this to fashion their life-style. Such products are – when Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and others were writing – the result of the expanding factory system. They were mass produced. Because they were mass produced, they could not provide any substantive degree of individuality.

While marketing and consumption were significant factors in their writings (Fromm, 2002, 2003; Horkheimer, 2004), there was a more foundational question rousing their interest in these ‘superstructural’ (cultural) forces in society. They were providing a response to Marxism. Marx fully expected the working class to register and revolt from their marginal position in society. As the inequalities fostered by the capitalist system made themselves increasingly apparent, they would stimulate a revolution; a revolt that would lead to the establishment of a socialistic economic system in which industry was owned by the workers and the benefits of production would return to those who provided their labour power, rather than to already wealthy owners or shareholders who did very little actual work. The problem that the critical theorists confronted was that the working class often did not revolt.

Within the critical theory tradition, marketing practice and the consumption it helps encourage are some of the major mechanisms through which people are distracted from the inequality of the social world. As standards of living have grown – even for those who are relatively poor (e.g. Horkheimer, 2004, p. 67) – it ties people to the existing status quo, to the economic system as it stands<sup>i</sup>. They do see the (limited) benefits they receive, often registering the ‘ephemeral’ nature of the satisfactions on offer (Adorno, 1991), but still do not

feel strongly motivated to change it out of fear of losing what they currently possess, can consume and may consume in the future.

The critical theorists were not always dismissive of marketing, consumption, distribution and exchange. Adorno, as a case in point, described the emancipatory aims of critical theory in less grand terms than complete social revolution (i.e. from capitalism to socialism). We experience emancipation, he submitted, when we do not feel hunger pangs, when we are free from anxiety and unhappiness, and when we do not have to conform to the dictates of social convention (Kellner, 1989). Of course, marketing and advertising can foster emancipation in these terms or weaken it. For contemporary critical thinkers, marketing practice tends to undercut the types of emancipation that Adorno hoped would be felt throughout society (Kilbourne, 1999).

Fromm (2002), like Adorno, appreciates the benefits accompanying consumption. Historically, he points out, consumption did make us happy. It made our day-to-day existence bearable. He is not, in any way, making a case that we should lead ascetic lives, avoiding the pleasures of the marketplace. His real problem revolves around the fact that much of what we consume is superfluous and that we are driven to consume not by our personal needs, but because the cultural and economic systems are perverted by capitalist imperatives for greater profit. To understand the nuances of his argument, an extended quotation is in order:

‘...there is a legitimate need for more consumption as man develops culturally and has more refined needs for better food, objects of artistic pleasure, books etc. But our craving for consumption has lost all connection with the real needs of man. Originally, the idea of consuming more and better things was meant to give man a happier, more satisfied life. Consumption was a means to an end, that of happiness. It has now become an aim. The constant increase of needs forces us to an ever-increasing effort, it makes us dependent on these needs and on the people and institutions by whose help we attain them...Man today is fascinated by the possibility of buying more, better, and especially, new things. He is consumption-hungry. The aim of buying and consuming has become a compulsive, irrational aim, because it is an end in itself, with little relation to the use of, or pleasure in the things bought and consumed. To buy the latest gadget, the latest model of anything that is on the market, is the dream of everybody...Modern man, if he dared to be articulate about his concept of heaven, would describe a vision which would look like the biggest department store in the world, showing new things and gadgets, and himself having plenty of money with which to buy them.’

(Fromm, 2002, pp. 130-131)

Like Veblen, he believes we are surrounded by images of the good life whose real purpose is to satisfy the desires of the business community for profit. This process undermines consumer sovereignty. We stop rationally evaluating our consumption practices (Fromm presents the customer as ‘passive’, merely ‘drinking’ in the imperatives provided by industry); it becomes a compulsion to get the latest, socially desirable items. This, for both Fromm and Marcuse, is irrational.

What the critical theorists did want to question was whether these industries delivered on the promises they were making. Generally, their response was downbeat. They were reflecting on a business system that was undergoing a period of massive expansion. And they had seen the use and ramifications of propaganda during the Nazi regime, registering how this did shape the views of the population in their home country (Germany). With this as their context, it is not surprising that the critical theorists held out *little* hope for social change via the actions of



the working class (cf. Horkheimer, 2004, pp. 81, 97, 99). They fully appreciated the fact that social change was being defused through the satiation provided by consumer goods<sup>ii</sup>.

While there was some pessimism in their writings, it did not overwrite their desire for social change or their belief that it was possible to tackle the harms and injustices created by the capitalist system. Intellectuals and other informed activists could play a role in social change by fostering 'estrangement' within their networks (Marcuse, 1964). They could point out how the marketing system encourages conformity (i.e. a herd instinct) rather than individuality (Fromm, 2002); how it provided only ephemeral satisfactions (Adorno, 1991); how it kept people working to achieve these limited satisfactions and that this was not ultimately fulfilling (see also Scitovsky, 1992).

Consistent with Marcuse, and echoing Veblen, Murray and Ozanne (1991) adopt critical theory as their intellectual prism and claim that capitalism, marketing and advertising are 'forcefields'. They are mechanisms for social control that surround the individual (Kellner, 1989). They help inform people about what is valuable in life, what needs are most significant, and how they can achieve the satisfactions that the marketing system is responsible for creating. In combination, the 'culture industries' help define the social world, our place within it, and focus our energies and efforts on the world of consumption. In conjunction, they warp our sense of self. We no longer build character through our actions, helping our friends, families, communities and those we otherwise indirectly touch. We buy our personality and self-image, crafting the latter courtesy of the purchase and possession of goods (e.g. Marcuse, 1964). We manifest what Fromm (2007, p. 21) calls a 'having' orientation. The production of character in line with the dictates of what the market and potential employers require is termed – somewhat confusingly in this context – the adoption of a 'marketing orientation' (e.g. Fromm, 2003, pp. 56-57).

Nonetheless, we should be wary about thinking that the critical theorists conceptualise the consumer as a dupe. This perspective is understandable. Fromm (2001) overplays the power of marketers and Lazarsfeld's (1941) review of critical theory comes close to sketching a dupe-like character. If we interpret critical theory to include people beyond the Frankfurt School, James Rorty's writing presents a dupe-ish individual; as does Alvesson's (1993). However, overgeneralising is not a good idea. We are dealing with many different writers, some more nuanced than others.

Neither Adorno (1975) nor Horkheimer (2004) presented the consumer as an unsophisticated dupe, although their language can be quite deterministic (e.g. Adorno, 1991, p. 105; Horkheimer, 2004, p. 101, 107-108; cf. Adorno, 1991, p. 131). Adorno suggested that most individuals did realise the satisfaction they derived from consumption was 'fleeting'. As he puts it,

'It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings...People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing full well the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to the satisfactions which are none at all.'

(Adorno, 1991, p. 103)

Clearly, the critical theorists and consumers alike registered that practitioners were not complete truth-tellers; that consumption did not always causally equate with happiness (see Fromm, 2002, p. 7, 11). The idea that it did was an ‘ideology’ (Adorno, 1991). It was a justification for a worldview based on consumerist satisfactions that did not generate anything like a long-term feeling of wellbeing. Its purpose was short-term in one sense. Immediate and limited gratifications were key in ensuring that the consumer returns to the marketplace as quickly as possible, thereby continuing the cycle of production and consumption. This repeated return to the marketplace hints at the long-term agenda in play.

Marketing and the advertising system partly function as ways of offsetting any ‘motivation crises’ that may confront people living in a capitalist system (Habermas, 1973). The social world into which we are born largely equates success with financial income (Fromm, 2003, p. 13) and we work to finance our purchasing habits – habits that are fostered by the marketing system itself (Adorno, 1991). Provided the system can continue to generate standards of living that people find appealing, it is likely to foreclose any serious reflections on its legitimacy (Habermas, 1975).

In the last twenty years, a small number of consumer researchers have taken critical theory as their paradigm, using it to flesh out an alternative concept of the consumer. Ozanne and Murray (1995), for example, outline the ‘reflexively defiant consumer’. They position this individual within the context of the capitalist system. This actor is surrounded by the potentially distorting influence of marketing communications. This sounds reasonable. However, their work shades into idealism quickly. Ozanne and Murray sketch an account of a motivated individual who exhibits radical sensibilities. They are critical of the status quo and treat the output of industry with cynicism. We do not doubt that some people adopt this stance, but we need to be realistic. The reflexively defiant person is a collage of many desirable attributes. It describes someone who mostly exists in a vacuum unencumbered by the constraints many of us experience in our everyday lives. Ozanne and Murray’s conceptual architecture is, put bluntly, far removed from the habitual, unthinking and routine nature of much human behaviour (Lafley & Martin, 2017).

Each of the thinkers referred to above – Veblen, Rorty, Fromm, Marcuse, Adorno, Murray and Ozanne – point out that power dynamics in the marketplace are complex. Business people try to influence consumers; and we do not always end up satisfied or benefitted by the experience. Handily, the work surveyed so far takes us from the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century (if we selectively ignore the Ozanne and Murray work!). We are now at the juncture when the marketing concept has been rhetorically and incorrectly positioned as emerging (i.e. the 1950s). Even after this alleged turning point, Adorno claims that practitioners inaccurately depict the consumer. They are not the sovereign individual of marketing lore. With this in mind, we need to tackle the notion of consumer sovereignty.

### **Consumer Sovereignty**

Consumer sovereignty is often united with the marketing concept (Dixon, 1992). Kotler did this in his books (Reekie, 1988). This would not surprise Galbraith (1970) who saw it as an article of religious faith in textbooks. The empirical realism of the concept is another matter. The linkage of the marketing concept and consumer sovereignty is a paradox (Brownlie & Saren, 1992; Dixon, 1992). Each concept looks realistic and reasonable. Combined, they contradict or deflate each other. Marketing professionals want to influence the consumer. They want to shape demand and meaning. They want to limit the exercise of sovereignty, yet they praise its merits to the sky when necessary (i.e. usually in front of regulators).

The idea of consumer sovereignty can be traced back to William Hutt in 1931. He pointed to earlier versions, referencing ‘the customer is always right’ and ‘the customer is king’ (Hutt, 1940). Of course, the lineage of these ideas stretches back much further. Adam Smith made the same argument when he referred to smart producers delivering what their target audiences wanted (Lynd, 1934). These ideas appear more frequently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably in the retailing practices of Marshall Field, John Wanamaker and Harry Gordon Selfridge. But what is always worth doing when thinking critically about the concepts we invoke is to look at the context in which they emerged. They are influenced by the events and belief systems of the time. The same is true of the notion of the ‘customer as king’.

As king or queen, the consumer is supposed to have ultimate power in the marketplace. Via their ‘dollar votes’ they help determine which firms survive (Dixon, 1992). Charles Coolidge Parlin is usually cited as coining the phrase the ‘customer is king’. Whether this is accurate or not, his 1914 statement did attract attention. What is not regularly appreciated is that Parlin said sovereign status did not apply to everyone. His view of the consumer focused on the white middle- and upper classes (Ward, 2009). If you were not part of this privileged demographic, then you fell outside of the class of sovereign individuals.

Today this concept straddles the globe. Even ostensibly Communist states have adopted the idea of the consumer ‘as a god or emperor’ (Gamble, 2007). Despite the fact its merits as an accurate representation of marketplace agency is questionable, it does perform other functions. Business owners, marketing managers and brand advocates use the concept to encourage employees to treat the customer well. It is a control mechanism which structures the delivery of service experiences (Gamble, 2007). It might not always succeed (Skalen, 2009), but its intent remains unchanged.

Stated simply, sovereignty entails the valuing of individual choice. It is contestable. Too much choice does not enhance human welfare. For starters, our preferences are usually vague. When excess information and multiple options are presented, they can overload, paralyse and stunt our choice-making process, leading to suboptimal outcomes (Botti & Iyengar, 2006). Choice, then, is a double-edged sword.

The concept of sovereignty is also more complicated than normally assumed. Pure sovereignty involves the individual having dictatorial power. State, government or external forces do not exist in this fantasy world as a force of control (Hildebrand, 1951). Equally dubiously, an individual is deemed sovereign when they can make rational, thoughtful decisions (Sirgy & Su, 2000). This sounds like the mostly imaginary ‘economic man’. It is a caricature we are unlikely to meet in the street. We do not often engage in deliberation about our consumption choices. We are led by our emotions, habits and the opinions of influential others (Galbraith, 1958, 1970), including corporations and their staff (Dixon, Ponomareff, Turner, & DeLisi, 2017; Pressey, 2015).

Companies, of course, typically ‘anticipate’ (Hutt, 1940) or ‘imagine’ (Galbraith, 1970) ‘the average consumer’s wishdream’ (Scitovsky, 1962, p. 267) prior to its expression in the marketplace. These ‘dreams’ are shaped via marketing communications. Nor should we forget that producers are attributed with sovereignty of their own – producers’ (sometimes deeply questionable) sovereignty (see Galbraith, 1970, p. 475). They have sovereignty in the sense that they do not have to respond to all requests in a free marketplace (Reekie, 1988). After all, anticipated risk is often an important factor in manufacturer decision-making. It can make their actions conservative to avoid large-scale financial mistakes (Scitovsky, 1962) which occur with some frequency (Zinkin, 1967).

Depending on who is consulted, preferences are structured in various ways. Galbraith (1958) referenced the growing centralisation of power in the economy, the greater use of marketing, consumer research and advertising and the implications of this for consumption behaviour (i.e. its delimitation). He talks about the ‘management of consumer tastes’ (Galbraith, 1970, p. 474n24), with Zinkin (1967) citing the performative function of marketing in relation to demand creation. Zinkin’s nuance was that the demand being promoted was usually a rethinking of existing preferences, rather than truly novel.

Lerner (1972) seems to have directed his attention at critical theory arguments about the external shaping of decision-making. He denounced these as implausible and asserts that socialisation and imitation were the major factors bounding sovereignty. Hildebrand (1951) took a different tack. He warned that producers will try to bias decision-making. This occurs whether we are talking about a multi-stage process like that between the customer (e.g. a doctor) and the consumer (e.g. a patient) or more directly when one person is the purchaser and user. Hutt, similarly, thought producers could exert a negative influence, encouraging ‘deleterious tastes’ (Hutt, 1940, p. 70). This was made less likely when advertising was regulated; when product distribution and labelling was subject to legislation and control (Dixon, 1992); when fraud and adulteration was prosecuted (Hildebrand, 1951); when people were educated and informed (Scitovsky, 1962) and a plurality of producers were engaged in effective competition (Hutt, 1940; Lerner, 1972).

This point about competition illustrates a misunderstanding about marketing. It bears little resemblance to the reality of the marketplace today as well. As a practice, marketing is about trying to minimise or avoid competition through brands, patents, contractual arrangements, habit creation and consumer lock-in. There continues to be considerable doubt over whether there is effective competition in the marketplace, especially given the growing sizes of corporations and the power they wield (see Dholakia, Dholakia, & Firat, this volume). Indeed, practitioners surveyed when Keith (1960) was writing were quick to rally against government intervention to ensure competition and the protection of the consumer (Barksdale & Darden, 1971).

Reflecting the tenor of the time, Hutt (1940) did privilege liberty in individual decision-making. Likewise, Zinkin (1967) calls attention to resistance being manifested against the marketing and advertising machine. People were, these authors maintained, free to make bad decisions as well as good. Not all shared these views. Lynd (1934, p. 4) conceptualised the consumer as ‘becoming confused and illiterate’ in the face of product proliferation and savvy marketing practices. These issues remain unresolved today. Sirgy and Su (2000), for instance, unpack the complexity that confronts the consumer in medical and high technology markets. This is compounded by their limited knowledge, comparative disinterest in extended problem-solving and largely habitual behaviour.

Sovereignty, then, is ‘always’ limited (Hildebrand, 1951; Hutt, 1940). In some contexts, the consumer is a ‘serf’, they are relatively powerless in comparison to their corporate overlords (Rotfeld, 2004). They could be people living in low income areas which already suffer from limited access to products and services. Retailers that set-up in these locations tend to offer a smaller selection and charge higher prices (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004). Alternatively, in light of industry willingness to misrepresent the safety of their products, people can find themselves buying dangerous, possibly adulterated items from ‘reputable’ and unknown companies alike (Boyd, 2012; Hanser, 2004). Illness and death sometimes accompany corporate actions, a topic we explore in more detail below (Custance, Walley, & Jiang, 2012).

With respect to individual sovereignty, the extent to which it reflects individual choice is problematic. Firstly, it depends on the economic system we live in (e.g. North Korea versus the United States). Secondly, structural, cultural, social and personal factors influence choice (Galbraith, 1970; Hildebrand, 1951; Lepisto & Hannaford, 1980). After all, many people live in economies where consumption is presented as the royal route to happiness (Galbraith, 1970). Some pursue this individualistically. Often this is only possible when we have access to middle-class, rather than working-class incomes. Others live in cultural environments founded upon the notion of the 'interdependent model of self' (Markus & Schwartz, 2010, p. 346). Community orientation, adherence to norms, a certain degree of inconspicuousness (Eckhardt, Belk, & Wilson, 2015), rather than self-definition and individuality, are more highly prized in these environments (Markus & Schwartz, 2010). Even if they are available, we do not necessarily make individual decisions about our consumption choices. This is true whether we live in individualistic nations (e.g. the United States) or collectivist countries (e.g. China). We are influenced by other people, sometimes following the crowd as described by the 'herd instinct' or 'trickle across' theories (Atik & Firat, 2013).

We must acknowledge that while scholars talk about the consumer as if they are a monolithic entity, this neglects the substantive differences between people. The population of China, for instance, is marked by large income disparities. High levels of wealth are routinely contrasted against those 'clad in rags and begging for alms' (Hanser, 2004, p. 15). The shopping experiences, service levels and product safety that various groups can expect are deeply stratified by income and perceived levels of wealth. Less affluent people often visit (former) state run department stores. They have shabby interiors, customers can expect a limited degree of politeness from staff, but nothing like the 'asymmetrical deference' found in luxury establishments built in the post-reform era (Hanser, 2007, p. 416). In these, the affluent sometimes act like misbehaving children, ignoring or treating service staff badly, shouting their requirements and calling for management to shame the worker (Hanser, 2007). The poor, on the other hand, are ignored or treated with high levels of disdain.

Thirdly, there needs to be effective competition. Without competition, it is highly unlikely that manufacturers will willingly produce a large range of items for various market segments. This is because they seek to maximise their profit levels and restricting supply to a limited range that satisfy enough consumers to meet organisational targets will suffice. Other customers can be expected to either satisfice (i.e. buy the nearest equivalent to their requirements that is 'good' enough) or forego consumption. If the market segments that are not being serviced become large enough or sufficiently profitable so that they attract new entrants to the market, the firm may change its approach to block new competitors from gaining a foothold.

Fourth, industry might refuse to use the most efficient and effective production techniques. Closely related is a 'vested interests' argument. Cartels are not unusual. Exploring this issue, Baker and Faulkner (1993) enumerate the ways firms try to control their markets. Some of these go beyond legal measures (e.g. political lobbying), straying into illegal territory by violating laws meant to discourage collusion (e.g. sharing future pricing strategies to limit competition). Marketing and sales managers have been implicated in formalised business-to-business price-fixing, the planned distribution of market shares and other restrictive activities (Faulkner, Cheney, Fisher, & Baker, 2003). Equally, they can be involved in 'informal' relationships (e.g. in the pharmaceutical and the insurance industries) (Lakoff, 2004). Their involvement reflects their comparatively low organisational position. This keeps them at a distance from senior management who can deny knowledge of any cartel-like activities (Baker & Faulkner, 1993). A cartel often frustrates the consumer, increases organisational

profits and cements its power base. This said, they are not all powerful. Incumbents can always be replaced by entrepreneurial firms (Zinkin, 1967).

Fifth, organisational ‘ignorance’ and ‘fraud’ likewise bound effective producer and consumer sovereignty. Sixth, the wealthy have a disproportionate influence on production; the poor are neglected in certain cases (Lerner, 1972; Karnani, 2018), feel their financial restrictions acutely and are subject to exploitation (Bailey, 2000; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Schulman, 2016). As a way beyond this, Hutt (1940) left room for government intervention to restructure inequalities of income, wealth and resources that were being controlled by powerful groups. Finally, sovereignty differs depending on the nature of firm-consumer interaction. Large firms can be less amenable to consumer articulations of their needs and desires; smaller companies may be more responsive (Etzioni, 1958).

It is often noted that critical researchers depict marketers as quite powerful. Mainstream scholars sometimes make remarkably consistent arguments, so we must refrain from positioning the former as making outlandish claims about marketing theory or practice. But it is clearly not only marketers who shape the cultural environment in which we live. They play a major role, but are only part of an orchestra of taste mediation (Arsel & Bean, 2013). Their activities are assisted by magazine editors, bloggers, celebrities and related figures that are called cultural intermediaries. They act as intermediaries between the culture industries (e.g. large corporations with deep marketing budgets) and the ultimate consumer (Negus, 2002). They take the free (seeded) products and information provided by the companies and translate this – sometimes complex, sometimes not – material for the people who watch their YouTube channels, read their magazines or otherwise engage with their content. In effect, these groups try to shape the way we think and act. For example, the fashion industry receives ongoing criticism for devaluing normal physiology. This affects those who look to these sources for guidance. We peer at our non-airbrushed body and wince. Creating dissatisfaction like this is undertaken as it keeps the magazines in business, giving them content and stories they can purvey. And dissatisfaction generates a response. We look for a product or service to deal with the condition being perpetuated by the magazine; a condition that can be treated with the products being heavily advertised in the pages of the same dissatisfaction creating machine.

A recent film by Elena Rossini called *The Illusionists* (2015) unpicked this process. It referred to the stigmatisation of cellulite – a normal accumulation of fatty tissue that was not considered troublesome in the past – and traced its elevation as a problem that required a marketer delivered solution. This is ‘market creation’ at its most dubious. Creating a problem, making people feel unhappy, and then selling them satisfaction. For commentators like Kilbourne (1999), marketing creates unhappiness. It cleaves voids to fill with consumption. This is a process that goes on throughout our lives. Where, we might ask, is the sovereign consumer here?

What seems odd given the centrality of consumer sovereignty is that it has been regularly undermined. There are prominent marketers who now question its empirical reality despite their earlier support. For instance, Kotler and his co-authors sound almost Veblenian at times. Marketing is not a reactive activity in their view. Now, for them, marketing is not about pandering to the customer. It is about managing them, shaping their demand and determining whether their needs and desires should be fulfilled (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris & Piercy, 2013). Profit generation, in this context, assumes priority. This is a problem as accruing profit and ensuring customer satisfaction do not map on to each other perfectly. The marketplace is a domain where conflict between marketers and consumers is likely to occur. Houston (1986), famously, says that firms will only satisfy needs when it enables them to achieve their

objectives. This bounds sovereignty, with the firm as the locus of decision-making and the font of power. This is the opposite of Keith's (1960) suggestion that power relations have shifted towards the customer.

Early authors registered the power dynamics and limitations facing the consumer (e.g. Lynd, 1936). They called the individual a compromiser, not a sovereign (Tadajewski, 2016a). We have Harry Tisdal to thank for this insight. Compromise, he maintains, is a major feature of organisational and consumer decision-making, irrespective of whether the customer was routinely invoked as the 'boss' of the firm for public relations and labour management purposes (Tadajewski & Jones, 2016).

Businesses make choices about the markets they will serve in view of their technological, economic, supply chain and distributional capabilities. Reflecting the costs of information gathering, they cannot usually obtain full information about their target market and need to hedge their bets (i.e. they compromise). Limits confront the customer as well. 'Mr. Average' cannot buy everything he wants. Nor is their decision-making totally self-directed. They compromise on their desires to meet the needs of their families. Their bank statement helps force compromise. So, people make acceptable (satisficing) decisions. And let's be honest, we can all be a little lazy. But, rationally so. After all, life is too short to devote hours to weighing up minor consumption choices.

### **Consumer Sovereignty and Marketplace Reality**

The assumptions associated with consumer sovereignty are shaky to say the least. The idea that marketers try to enable effective decision-making should make a novice student incredulous. Sure, the marketing concept is about listening to the customer (i.e. potentially enabling sovereignty). It is questionable whether this exercise leads to products that are consistent with the requirements of the individual. To reiterate a point made above, marketers want to structure and modify demand, not merely cater to the whims of the public.

Even more questionable are arguments that mass-produced items enable the production of a unique sense of self. This thesis weaves through much of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) literature. As mentioned above, critical theorists suggest that marketing does not enable the crafting of an individual identity, rather it promotes conformity. This should not be understood as a deterministic argument. Marketing is not a monolithic force (Holbrook, 1987; Pollay, 1987). Instead, we need to appreciate the varied nature of power relations in the marketplace and examine how these are stratified. This stratification – i.e. various levels of power and influence – means that those situated at different points will have different abilities to shape the thoughts, behaviours and practices of people at other levels. This process is not uni-directional and it is context and case specific.

Focusing on the individual and their playful modification of the items they buy ignores the fact that many of these goods are mass produced. This is one of the critiques of postmodernism and CCT respectively. As specialisms, though, they are attuned to and affirm capitalistic dynamics. Their work re-describes and promotes the status quo (see Dholakia et al, this volume). And they can be subject to managerial co-optation. Sometimes this is a function of interpretive researchers wanting to commercialise their skills. Their training, knowledge and wisdom are used to study consumers in situ to produce more marketable goods and services (Fitchett, Patsiaouras, & Davies, 2015). They help define the field for channelled imagination that trades on 'the illusion of difference' (Evers, 2016).

CCT advocates miss this channelling point when they stress the agency of the ultimate consumer. They *largely* ignore the political-legal-economic context and the supply chains

that help constitute the goods we buy (Denegri-Knott & Tadajewski, 2017). These have a major role in defining what we can buy in store or online. Atik and Firat (2013), for example, point out that fabric producers often forecast trends years in advance of the goods arriving in store. Their choices form the base options for the designers and magazine editors who promote the products that are eventually manufactured. The customer only makes their selection out of choices which have previously been winnowed down before they appear in stock.

Even those ordinarily depicted as ‘influencers’, the celebrities who grace the pages of prominent magazines are not exemplars of the postmodern or CCT consumer. To be sure, they are provided with whatever goods a company seeks to promote. In some respects, their sovereignty is limited to what they are given. In other circumstances, their choices are preformatted by stylists who have a major input into their decisions (i.e. French Montana is a good example). The fanciful conceptual architecture of the postmodern consumer or the CCT bricoleur thus needs to be scrutinised, rather than applied as a template (this has been a major problem with postmodern research). Basically, this means that concepts have shaped a version of reality without substantially being undermined by the empirical contexts (not being confronted).

Uncritically asserting extensive levels of sovereignty is remarkably naive. We know that practitioners want to limit it by creating and affirming habitual behaviour (Berinato, 2017; McGrath, 2017). We are not particularly rational, nor computer-like information processors. The same goes for the postmodern identity shifting chameleon. We get stuck in routines and ruts, constrained by our finances, interests and attention span (Wood & Neal, 2009). To state the obvious, creating habits means tying the consumer to the firm (Champion, 2017); it constrains the ability of other companies to effectively target the patron and access the profit stream they generate (McGrath, 2017). The overall effect is a reduction in competitor and consumer sovereignty.

Having now examined the marketing concept and consumer sovereignty in detail, we need to probe the connecting concept. This is the idea of ‘exchange’. In this material, the textbook façade of ‘win-win’ discourse associated with marketing practice falls away in surprising ways.

### **Rethinking Marketing as Exchange**

Exchange is the link in the chain between the marketing concept and sovereignty. It connects the two (or more) parties involved. What is glaring about some of the material on exchange is its disconnection from reality. Exchange is presented as benefitting both groups equally. For Bagozzi (1975) the ‘rule of equality’ frames the marketing concept. This ignores the power relations that exist in the marketplace. Even managerial writers find this argument unconvincing. Houston and Gassenheimer’s (1987) *Journal of Marketing* paper is a good counterpoint. They say that the marketing concept is ‘a myth’ intended to legitimate the practices of marketing in society. At a minimum, it offers practitioners a narrative they can use at dinner parties when they are asked to justify what they do.

If marketers consulted some of the articles available, they would find a representation of their practice that seriously diverges from mainstream accounts. For instance, Hirschman (1991) explores the concepts, assumptions and power relations embedded in articles published in the *Journal of Marketing*. Where marketers paint pictures of equality (Bagozzi, 1975) or ‘mutual gain’ in exchange (Fischer & Bristol, 1994), Hirschman identifies managerial fantasies of omnipotence and marketplace power coalescing in the hands of vested interests.



She finds that marketers elevate themselves to the dominant partner in an exchange; they understand their activities as controlling the consumer, rather than responding to their 'target market'. This concept itself signifies a certain way of thinking about the customer. They are not understood as active. They are the target. They are the enemy in business warfare and practitioners use sexualised language to describe their customer interactions (Hirschman, 1991). Rather than 'win-win' statements (Fischer & Bristor, 1994), we hear about penetration, thrusting and forcing the consumer to do managerial bidding (Bristor & Fischer, 1994). Marriage is not the metaphor of choice as is usually invoked in relationship marketing discourse, but stalking (via database technology) (Tynan, 1997). All in all, the individual is dehumanised (Hirschman, 1991). They are an object to be manipulated, a means to an end – the end being profit which is equated with success.

To be clear, Hirschman (1991) and Fischer and Bristor (1994) provide feminist analyses. This situates their work within critical marketing studies as they are using a form of critical social theory to highlight the biases, blind-spots and unequal power relations that permeate marketing theory and consumer research. They are aware that their scholarship could be controversial. Saying that, there are markets where references to violence, rape and death reflect 'norms'. The market for methamphetamine being an exemplar (Brownstein et al., 2012). Beyond the extreme, there is support for their findings in mainstream research. Gentry, Kennedy, Paul and Hill (1994) examine the experiences of people undergoing traumatic events in their lives (e.g. the deaths of loved ones). Such upheavals make these individuals vulnerable to predation. Most grieving people engage in limited decision-making and reflection, with 'mental confusion...common' (Gentry et al., 1994, p. 132). This opens the door to manipulation, profiteering and heartache. Indeed, some funeral home operators do not come out of the study well. Greed and systematic lying to their customer base was unearthed.

For Houston and Gassenheimer, marketing is about skewing the market. It is about the production of the *appearance* of difference in product offerings. Veblen could not have said it better. If business people were given the super-power to enact markets in the idealistic terms found in debates on economic performativity (where they conjure up a market to maximise their own benefit), they would envision a much less competitive arena, probably one in which they were the monopolist (e.g. Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987, p. 15). While Houston and Gassenheimer were writing for a mainstream audience, their appraisal of marketplace dynamics brings them into the orbit of critical thinkers. Thorstein Veblen and Fuat Firat would applaud the honesty of their analysis.

Both Veblen and Firat have – in their own respective ways – pointed out that marketing is about the avoidance of competition whilst presenting a veneer of competition (Plotkin, 2014, p. 512). This veneer is thin. As a case in point, when we walk around the supermarket it appears that the marketplace is highly competitive. There are many different product offerings from various providers. This semblance of profusion hides high levels of industrial concentration. The documentary, *Food Inc.* (Kenner, 2009), highlights that a small number of very large producers own many different brands. Behind this pluralistic surface is an industrial complex which mass produces food as cheaply as possible. Accompanying low prices are series of problems. Manufacturing concentration means that any sanitation problems (i.e. animal faeces in the meat) and bacterial infections (e.g. Salmonella, Campylobacter) can overrun the slaughterhouses and factories quickly. These can affect large swathes of the population giving them serious health conditions.

Their immense size and lobbying power means that meat companies have substantial political sway vis-a-vis regulators. Power relations in the market are not equal. Those engaged in

farming have limited power. If they are supported by loans for equipment and infrastructure by the industry, they must follow the guidelines demanded by their supply-chain partner. This means agricultural production on a scale where appropriate care for the animals can fall by the wayside. Concern for livestock, farmers and the customer are secondary factors in the pursuit of profit.

### **Choice and Sovereignty**

Choice facilitates sovereignty. We need alternatives for sovereignty to be meaningful. Marketplace stratification plays a role here too. These assumptions contrast those of some interpretive, CCT and postmodern studies that uncritically assume agency and freedom of choice. As a rough rule of thumb, CCT research tends to present the consumer as slightly more structurally constrained than postmodern writing. Within the latter tradition, the depiction of the customer is usually detached from empirical reality, with one argument being that people are no longer restricted by tradition. Closely connected is the thesis that our class position does not exert a substantive influence on how we live and work. There are numerous problems with postmodern conceptions of agency. Firstly, (predominantly) class-derived cultural capital will shape our selection of products and services (Holt, 1998). Secondly, race, ethnicity and overt religious affiliations can influence how people engage with us, affecting our opportunities in the marketplace and world of work. Thirdly, it is not clear that many people view consumption in active postmodern terms. Regularly changing identity is cognitively demanding, time-consuming and expensive. Most people probably eschew this level of commitment, preferring less involved forms of expression (Der Laan & Velthuis, 2016; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Reading this literature, it appears that the postmodern consumer is adept at negotiating the marketplace. This is possible only with various enabling conditions. Money, finance, education and literacy skills are important. But we do not live in a world where everyone is given equal opportunity to secure high quality education or the chance to succeed. Studies on low literate consumers deflate the exaggerated agency postmodernists espouse (Gau & Viswanathan, 2008; Viswanathan, Rosa, & Harris, 2005). The same can be said of blind consumers who demonstrate a mixture of vulnerability, creativity and skill in achieving their goals (Dunnett, Hamilton, & Piacentini, 2016). However, these individuals also suffer from degrees of depression, feel constrained by their home environment and find shopping akin to ‘torture’ (Falchetti et al., 2016). These groups are not the archetypical sovereign individual – if this fiction even exists.

For example, the issue of racism and its effects on product and service access are longstanding. Racism means that people are attributed different value because of their skin colour. Legislation was enacted in the United States to segregate races (i.e. so-called ‘Jim Crow’ laws). This prevented equal access to public services, retailing locations and private service environments. Marketing theory, in turn, reflected the racist assumptions and values circulating in the cultural environment<sup>iii</sup>. Mirroring this, since Parlin first uttered the phrase – the customer is king in 1914 – certain groups have been pushed to the edge of the marketplace (Ward, 2009). No matter what time period we consult, it is not difficult to find racist ideas and imagery infecting theory and practice. This is true from the turn of the twentieth century and the work of Katherine Blackford (Tadajewski, 2012), through to the discrimination faced in the ghettos of the 1960s, along with the demarketing literature of the 1970s (Kotler & Levy, 1971). When we delve into all this material, the inescapable conclusion is that race has been a divisive factor in provisioning. This has not changed. ‘Redlining’ continues to be a feature of the housing market (as well as other markets). This

refers to the refusal of loans, mortgages, insurance and related products to people living in deprived areas (Rugh & Massey, 2010).

Racial inequality shapes access to malls, the treatment people receive when shopping (Bailey, 2000; Mallinson & Brewster, 2005) and the types of disdain they face when making inquiries (Williams, 2005, 2006). It also restricts consumer choice on the internet. As the case of Airbnb made apparent, people renting out their accommodation have few qualms about adopting racist and ‘looks based’ discrimination (Fisman & Luca, 2016). Equally, those using Uber services appear uninhibited about proffering racist reviews about their drivers (Fisman & Luca, 2016). It is even the case that the algorithms applied in the selection of advertisements to be displayed online have used racially common names to generate marketing communications which reinforce negative stereotypes. Fisman and Luca (2016) call this ‘algorithm-generated discrimination’.

Claims to sovereignty are therefore complicated. There are many ways in which we can be discriminated against including based on our health and wellbeing. To be the idealised candidate for sovereignty we need to be wealthy, mobile, thin and healthy. Health is not something we can take for granted. Pavia (1993) explores the lives of young people living with HIV and AIDS. Their ill health dramatically alters their circumstances. Finding it difficult to work, their disposable income dwindles. Their social networks dissolve. Friends shun them; family members brush off their advances. In one case, the scorn was extreme, with one person’s obituary being published ‘before’ they had passed away to halt the ‘death threats’ aimed at her family (Pavia, 1993, p. 426). Pavia’s account spotlights the trope of ‘contamination’ and a dearth of empathy.

Not only do they find it difficult to buy the products and services that were once available to them – thereby indicating a limit to their sovereignty – their ability to divest was constrained by antipathy to their condition. People literally would not touch their possessions or pets. Even when they had access to money, their behaviour might look odd to the healthy. When their life expectancy was limited, some spent their money freely, purchasing alcohol, drugs and expensive products they would have avoided previously (Pavia, 1993). But it is not only those who are resource poor, deemed undesirable or suffering from ill health who have their sovereignty controlled.

Let us now examine the notion of ‘lock-in’ – something that probably affects most people reading this chapter to some degree. ‘Consumer lock-in’ refers to strong connections between a customer and company (Harrison, Beatty, Reynolds, & Noble, 2012). We become ‘locked-in’ to these relationships when the costs of breaking them are perceived to be too high. For critics of lock-in, for instance, it means we are purchasing suboptimal technology when better options are available or could have been successful with the right promotion and product trialling programmes (Stack & Gartland, 2003).

Lock-in is a function of many things. We become locked-in due to our financial investments and commitments (e.g. mobile phone packages, energy fixed price deals); the expertise developed in using a product (e.g. the QWERTY keyboard, an Apple or Android phone); or where social propriety ‘encourages’ us to patronise a service provider because we know the individual, interact with them socially or have familial connections (Harrison et al., 2012). Still, when companies use contracts to lock-in their audiences, it begs the question about whether the firm truly believes it is serving its audience equitably and satisfyingly. Lock-in is, in some cases, a means to prevent dissatisfied patrons from pursuing alternative options (McGovern & Moon, 2007).

Lock-in can also be a means to generate habitual behaviour. In his reflection on consumer sovereignty, Hutt proposes that we are ‘slaves of habit’ (Persky, 1993). This is not a total exaggeration. Being slaves of habit can, of course, be very negative depending on the products and experiences we are discussing. This is especially the case when we look at products that can cause addiction.

For early writers on sovereignty, addiction was one of the examples used to question the freedom of the individual (Hildebrand, 1951). It is true that addiction will likely wreck the life of the person involved and negatively affect those around them (Moyle & Coomber, 2015). More critically oriented observers of the changing nature of industrial society see the consumption of narcotics of all kinds as an almost inevitable concomitant of the stresses and strains of modern life. People are constantly looking ‘for something that will make life in an urban-industrial environment a little more tolerable’ (Huxley, 2004, p. 96). Even those people who seem to have everything: affluence, social networks and fruitful lives, find themselves slipping into alcohol and drug abuse, dependence and worse.

Martin (2015), for instance, studied a group of extremely wealthy women living in New York. There was little they could not buy or consume. Her respondents – and Martin on occasion – were not satisfied people. They might be very thin, have talented children, a wardrobe full of expensive clothing and multiple Birkin bags, but their physical management of self – plastic surgery, high-energy exercise – left them like ‘zombies’ (Martin, 2015, p. 147). Their stress played out in predictable ways. Alcohol and a variety of prescription pills were consumed regularly. There was no time of the day that someone was not using substances to obtain mental sanctuary (Martin, 2015). Of course, what initially appears to make life tolerable or interaction manageable, eventually isolates and devastates unless treated. Sovereignty dissipates. As Duff McKagan (2012, p. 195), the bassist for Guns N’ Roses reveals, what was once fun and exciting, eventually takes over everyday life:

‘I needed a tumbler of vodka and two lines of coke just to get off the mattress when I woke up. Alcohol and drugs were now bought in bulk. I wanted to have a sure supply around all the time. I was alone in my house and had no one and nothing to stop me ingesting bad stuff whenever I wished...I always took a bottle of vodka with me if I was going anywhere outside of my comfort zone, which is to say anywhere outside of a ten-block radius of my house.’

This habit nearly killed him. There are many other examples taken from the world of celebrity culture and everyday life that highlight the progressive delimitation of life as well as the reduction in sovereignty caused by drugs<sup>iv</sup>, alcohol and various other habits (e.g. Adler, 2011; Clegg, 2012; Daly & Sampson, 2013; Detzer, 1988; Lee et al., 2002; Sixx, 2007).

Literally being a slave takes us into the territory of dark marketing.

### **Dark Marketing, Human Trafficking and the Organs Trade**

Dark marketing has been defined as ‘the application of marketing principles and practices to the domains of death, destruction and the ostensibly reprehensible’ (Brown, McDonagh & Schultz, 2012, p. 196). Human traffickers are exemplar dark marketers (Smith & Betts, 2015). And the people who consume the sexual services provided by these actors have been equated, contra Adorno, to a ‘king or queen’ (O’Connell Davidson, 2004, p. 39). They select the objects of their fantasies without any discernible interest in the consequences of their actions.

Upwards of thirty million people are forced to labour or engage in sexual activities across the world. Disconcertingly, the purchasing of prostitutes is treated as an appropriate business

practice in some quarters (Smith & Betts, 2015). The accounts provided by those who have escaped these horrific situations should leave us in no doubt that service provision in these contexts is not a 'choice': 'In an interview with a girl who had been rescued from a brothel, she described how customers were allowed to do whatever they wanted with her; no one came to help no matter how loud she screamed' (Smith & Betts, 2015, p. 225).

These morally repugnant distributors understand their markets and how to move their victims through supply chains with the minimum of police interference (Pennington, Ball, Hampton, & Soualakova, 2009). They know what perversions will sell and they are ruthless in exploiting opportunities. Trafficked individuals suffer profoundly. People are maimed, psychologically traumatised and killed. The exercise of sovereignty for some, stunts and denies the opportunities of others to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives (Pennington et al., 2009). Other destructive customer-supplier relations are not hard to find. Capitalism, with its unequal distribution of income and resources, provides some people with the ability to enhance their physiological health. Others have little choice but to be an input into this circuit of consumption. We are talking about the market for human organs and body parts (e.g. kidneys, livers and corneas). This market is characterised by 'bioviolence' (Moniruzzaman, 2012), that is, where people are hurt by the consumption habits of others, often in ways that are deliberate and usually easily avoided.

Moniruzzaman (2012) points out that advertising is used to attract the poor to enter the market for human organs in Bangladesh. They are promised the chance of a better tomorrow. Debt can be repaid; funds for entrepreneurial activities can be obtained; or at least that is the hope that intermediaries in this market propagate. People are offered a limited amount of money for their organs; the consequences of donation are not well explained; the donor is transported across national boundaries and thereby distant from social networks and assistance. Once separated from family and friends, they are threatened; their fees are reduced; treatment is poor; post-surgical aftercare is non-existent; and scars, both physical and mental, are highly likely.

The visible scars which are a concomitant of the cheapest forms of surgical interventions are a signal to the donor's community that they have sold their organs. They will find it hard to secure and retain work; and selling organs can leave them vulnerable to illness. These factors weigh heavily. One individual described himself as 'subhuman' and deeply regretted his decision. Slipping into alcohol and drug abuse is not uncommon. Suicide looms large.

The trade in human beings and organs is one of the most destructive on the planet. This 'exchange' is not based on a 'principle of equity', 'equality', 'mutual benefit' or 'win-win' relations and satisfaction for all parties. One side will suffer depression, ill-health and consider suicide.

### **New Directions in Marketing Theory: Perverts and Biopolitics**

As we have demonstrated, the topic of consumer sovereignty is complicated. From a slightly different perspective, it might even be problematic to continually reaffirm the notion that the consumer is king. If you tell people their every whim will be satisfied and that they cannot be wrong, this may manifest in difficult, dangerous and threatening behaviour. Registering this, an emerging research frontier explores the topic of consumer misbehaviour. This literature generally focuses on the service environment and consumer-employee interactions. It has even led to the coining of a new term: 'jaycustomers', that is, those customers who negatively influence the working and shopping experience for other people, whether management, employees or customers. Misbehaviour can range from rudeness and exasperation (Dixon et al., 2017), returning products excessively frequently (Harris, 2010), all the way to swearing

and making unwanted advances on employees (i.e. suggestive comments through to threats of rape). It may involve property destruction or making unwarranted claims about service provision in public forums (Harris & Reynolds, 2004).

In these situations, the consumer can be an abusive bully (Bishop & Hoel, 2008; Korczynski & Ott, 2004); someone who threatens, stalks and talks ‘shit’ to staff (Stein, 2007). The result can be long-term trauma and ill-health for service workers and added costs for management. They can even be ‘predatory’ in nature; people who it is more sensible to avoid rather than confront (Tyler, 2011). Kings can be re-conceptualised as pervers.

Biopolitics in the marketing literature refers to the idea that practitioners are interested in studying the activities of the consumer at the physiological, psychological and everyday practice levels. This interest manifests in multiple ways. Companies want to secure staff members with specific psychological (e.g. autism spectrum disorder) and lifestyle dispositions (e.g. ‘hippies’) who can be linked with other organisational members (e.g. ‘geeks’) to generate creative sparks, inspiration and commercially viable products, services and experiences. Nissan, the car manufacturer, is well-known for utilising this process of ‘creative abrasion’ (Kumar et al., 2000).

As part of this wider biopolitical movement, greater attention has been devoted to the psychological unconscious, that is, influences that operate below the level of consciousness. Consciousness, in this context, is basically ‘awareness’ (Williams & Poehlman, forthcoming). Specifically, researchers are being encouraged to take seriously the physiological bases of our actions. This is not to displace the role of psychology or sociology, but to remind us that we are biological beings as well (Williams & Poehlman, forthcoming). Our biology and physiology do affect who we are and what we do, even if we do not fully appreciate it.

Kramer and Bressan (2015) deflate the concept of the unitary human being and (by extension) the individual as sovereign. They maintain that we are ‘superorganisms’ or ‘holobionts’. We are constituted by many factors that we probably do not register at all. These include microbes, viruses, and genetic materials from our parents (to name a few). Basically, these influences can shape our psychology. Some impose considerable costs, others have the potential to benefit people with Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. Organisms can influence our mental condition, our moods, impulsivity, risk-taking and a host of other practices that have implications for marketing scholars and professionals. What this means is that the notion of sovereignty is shattered, with our self-concept shaped by an ‘incessant struggle’ of entities that constitute who we are, how we think and undertake our lives (Kramer & Bressan, 2015, p. 464).

On a related note, Durante, Griskevicius, Hill, Perilloux, & Li (2011) unpack the significance of female hormones on choice-making. Put simply, when women are ovulating they are more likely to select ‘sexy’ types of clothing over more functional attire. This reflects competition with other – locally accessible – female competitors for male attention. It is not merely dressing to impress men. This ‘ovulatory effect’ suggests the signal importance of female biology for debates around consumer sovereignty, with managerial implications of their own. Developing this line of thought, Durante and Arsena (2015), for example, explored the issue of variety seeking (both product and mate-seeking) and found it associated with female fertility cycles. They coined the term ‘fertility-regulated desire’ to emphasize this influence.

Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) take a slightly different perspective. They describe how marketers tap into the lifeworld of individual consumers (i.e. ‘biopolitical marketing’). They try to understand all facets of the lived experience of their customer base, studying their everyday behaviour as well as their activities on social media, so that they can commercialise

these interactions with and without the person always appreciating the value extraction processes being applied. Zwick and Bradshaw's (2016) argument is, quite clearly, a critical reading of these strategies; related ideas have – speedily enough – been communicated to practitioners. Holt (2016) describes how they can plumb the psyche of consumer tribes as reflected in social media forums.

What is interesting is that Zwick and Bradshaw puncture the brand community literature at its core. They appreciate that a 'brand community' may exist in some cases. In others, it is the projection of a marketer fantasy – the dream of a community of buyers fascinated with their brand, product or service. The reality is that few people really care very much about brands (cf. Fournier, 1998). They are less satisfied with the services being provided by firms and exhibit far less loyalty than management desire (Hult et al., 2017). People, in other words, do not envisage themselves having relationships with most organisations in the vivid terms practitioners fetishize (O'Malley & Prothero, 2004). Some individuals may rally around a brand and this could be called a community in loose terms. It is the extensiveness of this phenomenon that is being critiqued by Zwick and Bradshaw (2016).

There are two sides to this debate. Some argue that appropriating the knowledge, interests and ideas of customers reeks of manipulation. Certainly, the power dynamics appear to mostly benefit the company (Cova & Dalli, 2009). One problem with this view is that it assumes a naïve consumer. They rework the 'false consciousness' argument, repackaging it for a new generation. This assumed that people did not know their own real interests and could be manipulated. Cova, Pace and Skalen (2015) pull back from this original 'working consumer' thesis by suggesting that their respondents were not actually as manipulated by companies for their 'immaterial labour' (ideas and knowledge) as their original proposal supposed. Those engaging with brands (and brand management) were reflective about the power relationships involved, appreciated the benefits they received from organisations (i.e. access to staff, advanced knowledge about new products and services, financial remuneration from designs that entered production, free products and so forth). So, rather than these individuals having their ideas used without compensation or permission, Cova et al's new thesis averred that people 'compromise'. They provide their time willingly because they believe the benefits outweigh the costs.

It is now relatively easy for firms to dig down into our lives. Whenever we use credit and store cards, hand over coupons or request information, we participate in market research (Duhigg, 2013). Smith and Sparks (2004), for example, looked at the data collected by Tesco for their Clubcard programme and found that the organisation could differentiate client consumption practices in nuanced ways, identifying when female customers became pregnant and tailoring their communications accordingly. It is not only in the UK that such practices are used. The case of Target in the U.S. exposes related interests.

In Target's biopolitical exercises, marketing staff worked in conjunction with highly skilled computing and analysis teams. They examined how lifecycle status shapes purchasing habits. Like Tesco, they wanted to know when customers became pregnant. Pregnant women and new families are cash cows. Not only do expectant mothers and young families come into store for baby related items, they are often so tired that they undertake all of their shopping in one location. Tiredness and price insensitivity do not merely lead to short-term financial gains for the company. Recall the lessons of relationship marketing, habits formed during these periods are likely to be translated into longer-term routines provided the experience is satisfying.

Target did not want to rely upon chance that their customer might announce to the firm that they were pregnant. They wanted to determine the likelihood of pregnancy before the individual knew. To do so, they produced ‘a pregnancy-prediction algorithm’ using data from their baby-shower service (Duhigg, 2013, p. 193). The company looked at the products and services an individual had bought prior to becoming pregnant and used this information to predict when other people exhibiting consistent consumption patterns were also likely to become pregnant. By cross-checking their databases, they identified ‘hundreds of thousands of women...that Target could inundate with advertisements for diapers, lotions, cribs, wipes, and maternity clothing at times when their shopping habits were particularly flexible’ (Duhigg, 2013, p. 195). This raises ethical concerns. A company ‘spying into their wombs’ is likely to be viewed – to put it mildly – as ‘kind of creepy’ (Duhigg, 2013, p. 204). So, Target adopted a cautious strategy by using communications which blurred their intent. They included products likely to appeal to new mothers and random items to obscure their motives. The placement of baby related products in personal communications was thus meant to look accidental. It was successful.

In sum, the biopolitical management of consumers looks like the next ethically questionable frontier for marketing theory and practice.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the marketing concept and consumer sovereignty. Both concepts were critically evaluated. The linkage of the marketing concept and sovereignty was called a paradox and problematised. We then engaged with the connecting concept between these two ideas – the notion of exchange – and illuminated how this hinges on the rhetoric of mutual benefit and arguments about equality. This representation was undermined. Finally, we concluded with a discussion of a contemporary research direction for marketing that holds the potential to shatter the concept of sovereignty still further: the biopolitical management of populations and physiological management of the individual. This unification of biology with marketing has been cited as a potentially fruitful area of research by some; critical scholars and educated observers should view it with a great deal of concern.

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<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that this is becoming more problematic in the present day as increasingly larger numbers of people are relegated to the margins of the economic system via the greater use of precarious zero-hours contracts (Jütten, 2013). Marginality, limited incomes, and the pressure to conform to certain standards of life can have many consequences. For some, it might spur them to work harder. This is a standard response by marketing professionals. They claim that their marketing communications encourage people to elevate their circumstances. For others, they may turn to crime (Brownlie & Horne, 1999) or avoid advertising and related promotional vehicles that press home their inability to consume (Belk et al., 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> Veblen provides a different response to the limitations of Marxism to that of Critical Theory. He did not believe that a revolution leading to socialism would be triggered by the working class. Poor living standards – even some of the most horrible states of misery and destitution – did not lead people to rally for social change. Veblen was more inclined to think that it sapped motivation and led to resignation (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1999).

<sup>iii</sup> Historically, marketing theory is predominantly a North American product and it reflects this context.

<sup>iv</sup> It is not only illegal drugs that can limit sovereignty. Manufacturers have been known to place products on the market that have serious side-effects which they have not adequately explained to their target market. This happens far too frequently. A recent case is Abilify (Aripiprazole) (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQM40yzRVOW>), but it is not hard to find numerous others whose effects on the person taking them can be seriously harmful in

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terms of the physiological effects and the ramifications for the individual, their families and overall quality of life (see Tadajewski, 2016b).