

OPINION: Ivory Arches and Golden Towers: Why We're All Consumer Researchers Now

Pat Wehner

In her recent book on global brand marketing and its discontents, journalist Naomi Klein writes that from the perspective of marketing executives at companies such as Nike, Coca-Cola, and Disney, there was nothing inherently threatening about the “culture wars” fought on university campuses during the 1980s. Before that time, positive images of gays, lesbians, and people of color had been nearly as absent from advertising and the mass media as from the traditional literary canon. But unlike the politically conservative opponents of university curriculum reform, enterprising marketers quickly realized they had little to lose by supporting a goal of equal “representation.” Consumer experts were describing the so-called minority markets as the growth opportunities of the future. At the same time, the kind of conspicuous multiculturalism perfected by fashion companies such as the Gap offered affluent mall-goers of every background the opportunity to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan and politically down with the program simply by investing in a pair of \$50 khakis. By the mid-1990s, brand managers were routinely envisioning the multicultural United States, in Klein’s trenchant phrase, as “Representation Nation,” a land where ethnically balanced and well-chiseled groups of friends gather for Tommy Hilfiger photo shoots. No matter that the windbreakers pictured as accessories of social harmony and inclusion were sewn by Chinese workers earning 20 cents an hour (104–24).

Disheartening as it may be, Klein’s assessment is not exactly new. Journalists and academics alike have observed that the principles of pluralism, diversity, and tolerance espoused by university administrations often fit comfortably with the global designs of corporations (see, for example, Rieff; Averill; Leach; West).

After all, the whole idea behind *The New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman’s celebrated “Golden Arches Theory” of world geopolitics—which, until NATO

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aircraft bombed Serbia during the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo, held that no country hosting a McDonald's franchise had ever declared hostilities on a fellow Mc-Colony—is that intense competition for markets reduces prejudice, nationalism, and ethnic hatred to signs of poor corporate management. Nor is it so stunning to find that marketers seldom waste their sense of irony on personal introspection. This professional lack of self-consciousness is especially apparent in today's "been there, done that" advertising environment, where an ironic sensibility might be more profitably applied to Sprite commercials mocking the superficiality of celebrity endorsements.

But Klein's claim that campus multiculturalists have failed to produce an effective response to the stark inequalities and rampant exploitation that have accompanied the expansion of the global economy deserves our attention, not the least because it raises the question of how we might all have become unwitting partners in the process. Today, given how strenuously the advertising, marketing, and public relations staff at Fortune 500 companies labor to demonstrate their commitment to pluralism and diversity, it might be time to declare the "culture wars" over and begin sorting the wages of our success. Some undeniably positive developments have accompanied the advent of marketplace multiculturalism. Historically marginalized populations have received increased recognition, while the whole phenomenon of "identity marketing" has provided an encouragement for young people to value racial, ethnic, and cultural differences as sources of pride and pleasure (see, for example, hooks). Yet the distinguishing feature of "Representation Nation" often seems to be, in the words of Stuart Hall, "a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind" (23), especially when it comes to issues of power.

If anyone believes that cultural and literary theory might still provide salvation by creating a platform for academics to stand apart and critique the workings of the marketplace, recent issues of the *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)*, the official publication of the Association for Consumer Research, warn that the platform is getting crowded. In the last five years, *JCR* has featured a number of articles such as "Deconstructive Strategy and Consumer Research" (Stern), "Laboratory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption" (Firat and Venkatesh), and "Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses" (McQuarrie and Mick). Indeed, the titles lately given to some consumer research studies have become all but indistinguishable from the presentations listed in the Modern Language Association convention program, right down to the standard three-part subtitles, the fondness for creative punctuation, and the sly allusions to popular culture. And though it is tempting to dismiss these similarities as the work of intellectual con-artists and counterfeiters, the unmistakable sophistication of the arguments suggests otherwise. Consider the following passage, from an article entitled "Post-structuralism and the Dialectics of Advertising: Discourse, Ideology, Resistance," which was included in a marketing research collection published in 1997 by Routledge:

In the case of mass communications such as advertising, the viscous meaning in the text is subjected to individual readings and to elaboration in social contexts where the social reality of the group and self is compared with the consumption-based mythology of advertising before a contextualized meaning is interpreted. The seminal work of the Frankfurt School in developing Critical Theory has not been eclipsed but has gained renewed importance with the recognition of advertising as a potent ideological force. However, Horkheimer's and Adorno's rather pessimistic account of the ability of the individual to resist imposed meanings must be adjusted in the light of polysemy and oppositional social practices. For even if we only imagine freedom, imaginary concepts can have real effects. (Elliot and Ritson 219)

Given Routledge's well-earned reputation for publishing work on the leading edge of the unintelligible, there is nothing very remarkable about the prose. What is more startling is that the authors in question, Richard Elliot and Mark Ritson, happen to be a professor of marketing and a lecturer in management studies, respectively. Of course, their radical discovery about the power of advertising—that brainwashing is harder than it looks—has been a standard corollary of reader-response literary criticism for years. But even if we dismiss Elliot and Ritson's epiphany as last year's model, what do we make of the inconvenient fact that their account of the differences between poststructuralism and postmodernism might pass for assigned reading in a graduate seminar on critical theory?

Indeed, Routledge now publishes an entire series on "Interpretive Marketing" with titles such as *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views, and Visions*; *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*; and *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology, and the Illusion of the End*. The firm's parent company, International Thomson Publishing, has established its own franchise with the business text *Postmodern Marketing*, and its sequel, *Postmodern Marketing Two*. The reference lists in these collections are at times indistinguishable from those in recent volumes in literary theory or cultural studies. We find the usual suspects, poststructuralist and postmodernist surnames such as Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Lyotard. We find both the American and British inflections of cultural studies, Janice Radway and Jackson Lears, Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige. We find names seldom uttered today within the confines of their own discipline, their owner's claims and dispositions not having aged so gracefully. From the graveyards of literary criticism, for example, consumer theorists have exhumed John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, and Lionel Trilling. We even find theorists and critics who, by virtue of their expressed politics, would seem, at best, hostile witnesses for marketing researchers: Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, and Trihn T. Min-ha, to name some of the more striking examples. And although these lists might amount to so much name-dropping, I suspect the truth is that this new breed of consumer theorists understands the vocabularies of cultural studies as well as anybody—and perhaps better than most. "Postmodern" marketers talk of heteroglossia, habitus, hegemony, and hybridity and

appear confident their colleagues will find these concepts useful in thinking about consumer behavior.

Even if we protest—how could these mercenaries really “get” Jameson or Kristeva or Lacan—we might well ask, since when have our local celebrities been required reading for the noncommissioned officers of industry? From a historical perspective, the answer is since before such a thing as “cultural studies” ever came into being. Research entrepreneurs—academics who have made their services available to business patrons—have been part of the university landscape for most of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, for example, the émigré sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld established the Bureau of Applied Social Research on the fringes of Columbia University and secured much of his institute’s funding by designing public opinion surveys for business firms. During the 1950s, consumer experts were greatly influenced by University of Chicago anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, whose nine years of fieldwork on the class structure of a New England community garnered glowing endorsements from speakers at American Marketing Association conventions. Although most of the research entrepreneurs from these earlier generations received their formal training in the social sciences, art and literature were also proposed as potential sources for business insights. Warner encouraged executives to read popular novels like *What Makes Sammy Run?* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* as case studies in class mobility, and he once spent a half-dozen pages demonstrating how his class measurement formulas could be applied to the characters in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (Warner, Meeker, and Eels). Other marketing experts, apostles for the oddball collection of techniques known in the 1950s as “motivation research,” urged their peers to consult the work of Carl Jung and Franz Boaz, sociologists A. B. Hollingshead and David Riesman, and philosopher Suzanne Langer’s writings on symbolic communication.

Although it is true that these kinds of partnerships have a long history, it is also apparent that the terms of exchange between business professionals and academics today contain important differences. In the most obvious departure, a group of credentialized intermediaries, professional consumer researchers, has appeared over the last half-century and now handles most of the introductions. Once little more than the frontline observations of sales executives, consumer research was formally established as a subdiscipline within the marketing programs of many university business schools in the 1970s. From their beginnings in demographic surveys and public opinion interviews, consumer researchers soon progressed to clinical trials, focus groups, statistical modeling, and computer databases. All of these tools and methods were adopted in an effort to prove the fledgling “science” of consumer research could discover some logic behind the puzzling whims of desire. More recently, the field has been witnessing a second split with the past, a major shift in outlook that insiders have described as everything from a “market correction” to an all-out revolution. To many humanities scholars and social scientists, the outlines of this shift may appear strangely familiar.

Based in a conviction that all truth is socially constructed, today’s consumer experts have set about redefining their goals: from uncovering the universal predictive laws of the market to understanding the multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory identities of consumers themselves. Diagrams, flowcharts, and other illustrations of marketing certitude have been joined by ethnographies, close readings, discourse analysis, and personal introspection. John F. Sherry Jr., a committed advocate for the “postmodern” or “interpretive” turn in consumer research, argues that the current spirit of change was precipitated by a “crisis of confidence” in which marketing’s accepted wisdoms—everything from how to measure customer demand to the economic function of marketing itself—were called into question (see, for example, Belk; Sherry). Sherry locates the first rumblings of the insurrection in 1986. That year, a backlash against “nontraditional researchers” at the annual conference of the Association of Consumer Research touched off a bitter struggle for control of the discipline’s professional organization. Among the partisans of postmodern consumer theory, the quantitative and formula-laden approach of the past was ridiculed as “dog food managerialism,” while the traditionalists disparaged the new interpretive techniques as the makings of “weird science.”

Sherry notes that one of the earliest flash-points in this struggle was a *Journal of Consumer Research* article that startled readers with semiotic analysis of the film *Out of Africa*. To this day the author of that article, Morris B. Holbrook, still delights in presenting himself as something of a marketing maverick, although he now occupies the decidedly establishment title of the W. T. Dillard Professor of Marketing in the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University. The highlights of Holbrook’s career illustrate how eagerly “postmodern” consumer theorists defy the stereotypes of their profession. As a past president of the Association of Consumer Research, Holbrook once urged his colleagues to recognize the role of “lyricism” in their work, calling upon everyone from Alexander Pope to I. A. Richards to Crosby, Stills, and Nash in support of his argument. In playful essays filled with personal anecdotes and pop culture references, he likes to refer to himself as “Morris the Cat” while describing his feminist awakening and other professional turning points. Holbrook’s background also includes a B.A. in English from Harvard and a book about television game-show audiences published by the University of Bowling Green Press, and although these accomplishments are still unusual for the field, they are not altogether unique. Although marketing Ph.D.’s remain the standard credentials for consumer researchers, degrees in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and English literature are becoming more common. Postmodern consumer theorists such as Holbrook, Stephen Brown, Elizabeth Hirshmann, and Barbara Stern—all of whom make ideas borrowed from literary criticism central to their work—have become star attractions at international conferences. But as often as these researchers find lit-crit or cultural theory to be a source of inspiration, their names are all but unknown in departments of English. The reason is that few of

us in the humanities are much aware of these trends, and many continue to regard marketing research to be the stuff of . . . well, dog food managerialism.

Since the establishment of marketing and consumer research as institutionalized courses of study, the careers of its leading practitioners have proceeded all but unnoticed by the rest of the academy. At the same time, the work of consumer researchers has begun to more closely resemble that of literary critics and cultural studies scholars, not only in borrowing ideas and methods but, perhaps more significantly, in having many of the same aspirations for theory. Rutgers University Professor of Marketing Barbara Stern urges her peers to regard literary criticism as an important tool to jumpstart their creativity, evaluate their hypotheses, and test inherited assumptions about consumer behavior. Stephen Brown, one of the most consistently entertaining of the postmodern marketing theorists (in contributors' notes, he likes to describe himself as "the Professor-Formerly-Known-as-Retailing"), illustrates the usefulness of critical theory by deconstructing the stories that marketers tell about themselves. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of *heteroglossia* and *carnivalesque*, Brown describes how upon further review one of the latest management fads, the so-called "client-centered" approach to marketing, collapses under the weight of its own contradictions.

As these examples suggest, postmodern marketers value theory as a means of overturning the accepted wisdoms of their field. As might be expected, the questions explored in these studies are often of a purely applied nature: What difference can a brand image make? Which people have the most influence on the prospective buyer? Little about consumer research has changed in this regard. In a few instances, however, this critical impulse is extended to the structural features of consumer society, asking, for example, what responsibility marketers might have for discouraging habits that are personally or environmentally destructive. As the quotation from Elliot and Ritson indicates, advertising campaigns, long an object of analysis in the rhetoric classroom, have become a focus for semiotic, feminist, or even Marxist readings in marketing journals. Again, while many of these readings offer practical advice about how advertising firms might improve the effectiveness of their appeals, at least a few examine the cultural assumptions embedded within the slogans and images, holding the designers accountable for the ethnocentric, patriarchal, or heterosexist undercurrents within their messages.

Cynical observers might conclude that today's consumer experts continue to appropriate insights from the humanities for the same reasons they always have. Most often, it seems, our cherished theories are taken up by the marketers as weapons of opportunity for bludgeoning their rivals. But in an era when the vocabulary of marketing has infiltrated the academy and often leaves us feeling like sales associates for the corporate university, we may wonder if the balance of power has not tilted. Today, consumer researchers hardly need us to legitimize their field in the eyes of corporate clients. On the other hand, though their absolute numbers may be small, postmodern consumer theorists might well function as hidden persuaders who help sustain a cash flow to certain areas of humanities research. This kind of influence is difficult to

gauge, but the musings of marketing visionaries have undoubtedly contributed to, for example, the enthusiasm demonstrated by some foundations and policy institutes for studying the globalization of cultures. So too, we might wonder, in an era of humanities downsizing, whether it hurts to have a Morris Holbrook quoting Wordsworth to a roomful of marketing executives, or filling his articles with doggerel like

Recall, the proverbial swallow
Does not make a summer. Hence,
A thick description must not wallow
In one's own experience. (253)

At very least, this makes a strong case for the continued existence of poetry writing workshops.

Meanwhile, it would be disingenuous not to allow that the title of this essay can be read more than one way. We are indeed all consumer researchers now, but our most frequent contributions are not in the realm of literary theory or cultural studies. Rather, we contribute through the Universal Product Code and the checkout scanner, by wittingly or unwittingly permitting our names to be added to the consumer databases that generate maps of our "neighborhood clusters." In other words, the hard facts and figures of marketing "science" are still very much in evidence, and there is reason to suspect that postmodern consumer theory signifies nothing, its sound and fury barely audible outside a few convention halls. The struggle among marketers to determine how the enduring concept of consumer "lifestyles" will be defined provides a telling example. On the one hand, there are the postmodern theorists, compiling detailed ethnographies of Harley-Davidson riders, whole-food supermarket shoppers, hip-hop listeners, and Internet users while emphasizing that the construction of identity is an inherently fluid and fragmentary process and that a person might conceivably belong to all these groups and more.

On the other hand, there is the Claritas Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Dutch information services multinational VNU, which compiles "lifestyle cluster" data to help marketers design advertising and direct-mail campaigns. Descriptions of these lifestyle clusters—each summarized by a clever designation like "Urban Achievers," "Shotguns and Pickups," "Rustic Elders," or "Hispanic Mix"—can now be cross-matched with audience data for every major form of media: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, the Internet, even the local yellow pages (see Weiss). Most recently, VNU added to the "synergy" of their databases by purchasing the venerable A. C. Nielsen television rating service in a deal worth \$2.7 billion. These dubious catalogs of consumer "types" have been a frequent target for the criticism of postmodern consumer theorists. Still, when it comes to influencing a client's decisions about which products to develop, where they will be distributed, and how they will be promoted, a potent combination of technology and convenience places the nutty professors at a clear disadvantage.

In the end, any evaluation of how marketing experts make use of critical theory requires us to venture into the murky territory of motives, where few can be trusted

on their words alone. Here, contrary to popular perceptions of marketers, some of today's consumer theorists exhibit signs of a social consciousness. Douglas Holt, an assistant marketing professor at the University of Wisconsin, has written extensively about French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" and has proposed that a similar phenomenon might contribute to class stratification in the United States. Humanities scholars might find themselves agreeing with the editors of a volume on "radical thought" in marketing, who argue that one of the most compelling reasons to foster critical theories is the powerlessness of increasing numbers of people to participate in the production of knowledge (Firat, Dholakia, and Bagozzi). Still other marketing experts have argued their discipline has an obligation to address some of the more troubling consumer-related phenomena in our society, including pervasive status anxieties, the multiplying numbers of compulsive buyers, the ongoing destruction of the environment, and the continued privatization of public spaces. But in the present ideological climate, what is perhaps most encouraging about postmodern consumer theory is the frequency with which its proponents reject the dogma of a "free" and self-regulating market and instead demonstrate how tangled, imperfect, and inherently *political* the workings of the market can be. Even if postmodern consumer theory amounts to little more than a shrewd bit of self-promotion and public relations on the part of many marketers, we might take some cold comfort in this implicit challenge to the economic orthodoxy, bearing in mind journalist William Greider's wry observation that "every important social change usually begins in hypocrisy."¹

Closer to home is the emergence of postmodern marketing incontrovertible (albeit ironic) evidence of the influence our theories might have upon society at large, or does it represent the final sellout of our critical potential? Clearly, we have a part to play in deciding the answer. Enamored of our own theories about the mass media, popular culture, and consumer society, we have often neglected the ideas and models that carry the most weight in a world of Disneys, Viacom, and Microsofts—the conventional wisdoms about audiences, markets, and cultural "product" that justify the actions of marketing and media decision makers. It is an obvious point, but one the passage from Elliot and Ritson quoted above bears out: the more abstract and removed from real-world examples that cultural studies has become, the more its vocabulary and rhetorics are available for unforeseen ends. The language of "resistance" and the active, discriminating consumer are easily adaptable to the political agenda of the economic Darwinists and free marketeers, much as the abstract notion of a "color-blind society" has been used to chisel away at the popular support and legal foundations for affirmative action policies. This is the deeper concern behind the parody of cultural studies as a bunch of pointy-headed wannabes arguing about how Madonna's career died for our sins. Most of us are willing to admit that the more inflated claims made by cultural studies scholars have sometimes warranted this kind of criticism. Even if, by some stretch of the imagination, popular culture and the free market give all of us

active, resistant consumers a level field on which to play, someone else continues to own and manage the ballpark, and there are still people outside the gates.

Sociologist Michael Schudson writes that the cultural studies truism that "no knowledge is innocent" has too often amounted to "a rationalization for expanding and making relevant the fading place of literary studies in our culture" (393). He observes that even as a loose confederation of feminists, Marxists, postcolonialists, queer theorists, and New Historians has toppled the Great Books from their pedestal, literary scholars have extended their reading skills into areas such as popular culture, political theater, and social performance. The danger in annexing this territory, Schudson argues, is that none of these phenomena can be reduced to a mere text. But although he may be correct to question some of the claims of the cultural studies movement, articles such as those published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* indicate it may be premature to judge the power of literary theory as fading. The apparently sincere appreciation that some consumer researchers have for literary criticism and cultural studies, not to mention the appearance of a sort of business school underground that questions marketing orthodoxy, raises the possibility of some new alliances if we are willing to risk them. If our goal is to have a genuine impact, not only in playing the popular culture game but in deciding its rules, rosters, and ticket prices, now might be a prudent moment to take an interest in the kinds of research emerging from business schools. We should be prepared to do our own translations of cultural theory and not leave that work to others, so that we can make the case wherever possible that critical inquiry and progressive politics might prove to be the foundations of good business practice. As critics and activists, our responsibility is then to hold the decision makers to these standards, aligning ourselves with others who are attempting to redefine consumer issues within the broader frames of human rights campaigns, racial justice movements, international labor struggles, and continuing efforts to end the oppression of gays and women. Indeed, the real test of our interdisciplinary mettle might be to live up to Cornel West's rousing call for "intellectual freedom fighters" with one foot cautiously in the mainstream and the other grounded in progressive traditions of cultural critique. For those of us who imagine some greater role for cultural theory, this has become a pressing challenge. Otherwise, cultural studies runs the risk of becoming a sort of intellectual outsourcing, reducing people like us to writing software that keeps the machinery of marketing and media conglomerates from becoming obsolete.²

NOTES

1. William Greider, lecture at Agnes Scott College, 5 October 2000. The remark that Greider attributes to "a wise friend," also appears in Greider's article, "Waking Up the Global Elite" (*The Nation* 2 October 2000: 17–18). Greider was paraphrasing a remark by Lawrence Goodwyn, a historian of social movements in the United States.

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