

SAREN M., MACLARAN P., GOULDING CH., ELLIOT R.,
SHANKAR A., CATTERALL M.

Critical marketing – defining the field

Elsevier, Oxford, UK, 2007

The aim of this book is to explore marketing less visible sub-areas – *Critical Marketing*. We are facing a significant current of research and publications in the field of marketing, and management that takes a critical stance. Critical research in marketing however has lagged some way behind other management academic subjects in its volume and visibility.

This book is the first book on Critical Marketing that provides a compilation of original papers from well-known critical authors within marketing. The idea of such a book arose from a series of Critical Marketing seminars, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK. These seminars were designed to bring together an international group of scientists from a wide range of marketing areas to foster a strong critical forum within the academic marketing community.

The editors of this book were often asked, “What do you mean by Critical marketing?” But, there is no easy answer to this question. By reading the papers included in this volume, we discover that many debates on the meaning and use of the term “critical”, and consequently on the “Critical Marketing” concept, have been held.

The writing reflects this meaning negotiation and illustrates the difficulty of trying to define and to describe a concept, which still remains loosely defined and fuzzy.

Some readers will find the term “Critical Marketing” frustrating mostly because the language is not static, its evolving and defining a term it means most of the time to reflect the changing nature of the context that we are communicating.

The major problem in defining Critical Marketing is that academics are presumed to engage critically with ideas and describing someone as a critical academic is a sort of tautology.

The spirit of the book is to build on the perspectives and create a more substantial cohesive identity for critical marketing, an identity that can embrace differences as well as similarities, disagreement as well as harmony.

The volume is organized in three sections that follow the main themes subject to debate: (1) *Being a Critical Marketer – Reflections from the Field*; (2) *Critical Debates: Questioning Underlying Assumptions* and (3) *Effecting Change through Critique: Social and Environmental Issues*.

Part One focuses on the critical marketer concept and tries to cover in detail many of the debates on the subject. It is also an excellent introduction for any researcher wishing to follow a critical path in marketing.

The chapters reflect diverse ways of understanding the critical concept from various academics' perspective.

The debate is unsuccessful in defining the "critical" concept and the attempt to clarify it is useless. In fact, all initial chapters gathered in part (1), highlight the politics of representation that can undermine the critical marketing project.

The chapters of part (2) *Critical Debates: Questioning Underlying Assumptions* challenge not only taken-for-granted aspects of mainstream marketing thinking and research, but also various assumptions about marketing phenomena, often made by critical and cultural theorists from outside the marketing scope. The authors review the "marketing" concept, "marketing" questioning in the process its continued validity in relation to the full range of human activities that have become prime sites for study in this ever-expanded field. Instead, they propose the term "societing" and put forward an argument as to its greater relevance to the dynamic and ever-changing world of contemporary market-based phenomena.

Another chapter, from the same part (2), further explores and critically deconstructs the use of language within marketing, opening up questions regarding such taken-for-granted marketing axioms as "consumer sovereignty". Chapters 8 and 9 underline the power of advertising. Advertising, of course, is one of marketing's most criticized areas, particularly by those outside the marketing scope.

Finally, in this section of the book, chapter 10 questions another frequently made assumption about the inescapability of the market and the lack of consumer's agency. "Can consumers escape the market"? This is a question used to interrogate some sociological dimensions of each of the component words of this phrase, in an effort to assess the meaningfulness of the question. The author suggests the agency concept is conceptually problematic and the anti-consumption ideology that seems to underlie the overarching question is, in fact, a class-based ideology in the UK and in the USA.

The entire part (2) raises highly thought-provoking conceptual and theoretical issues and overturns many existing preconceptions. To be truly effective, however, critique needs to bring about some type of change, not only in ways of thinking, but also in ways of doing.

The chapters in part (3): *Effecting Change through Critique: Social and Environmental Issues*, unanimously explore key issues on effective social and environmental change. Chapter 11 discusses Social Marketings' potential contribution to Critical Marketing. The authors critically analyze the way in which commercial marketing impacts upon the people's health and welfare and the way in which the same marketing principles can be used to solve social and health issues and to influence policy decision-making. Generally, they argue that social marketing provides the marketers a coherent framework, probing them to consider the broader social implications of their activities.

After reading this book, one can conclude that there is a clear basis for Critical Marketing to influence both policy and practices as well as to have an indirect impact via our teaching practices.

Bucharest, 18 January, 2010

Manuela EPURE, Marketing research professor, Ph.D.
Spiru Haret University