

Power in Marketing

A broadly dimensional approach



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Dedicated to the memory of R.G.S.

Preface

The title of this book reflects my aim to explore the extent to which dimensional theories of power might contribute to the understanding of power in the context of marketing and consumption. I was drawn some time ago to the theory of power developed by the US political theorist Robert Dahl, the critique of Dahl mounted by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz for neglecting consideration of a second, hidden, dimension of power, and finally, to Steven Lukes argument for a third dimension of 'invisible' power. Given that at that time discussion of power in the field of marketing was limited to research based on Dahl's ideas to power relations in the supply chain, I thought there was scope to to apply his ideas and those of Bachrach and Baratz and Lukes more widely to the discussion of power in consumption.

I was drawn to the above authors for several reasons. Firstly, because they recognise that the economy and the polity are not separate spheres but rather are interpenetrated and mediated by law. The market, as Marx once noted, is the work of human hands, and the institutions in which it is manifested today have nor arisen by accident, (although unintended consequences are always at play), nor as some form of natural progression or evolution, but through the decisions made people in government and law who have been guided by an ideology that offered them a visions of what the world ought to be.

Perhaps Adam Smith's greatest achievement was his argument that there is no need for Leviathan, but rather that spontaneous order will arise from the decisions made by a myriad of individuals acting freely in pursuit of their self-interest in the economy and in the polity. From this, if sovereign power is to be delegated into the hands of the citizen, then politicians ought to look to the interests of their electors and likewise, firms ought to serve the interests of the consumers who buy their goods. Given such equivalence, one might imagine that democracy and market capitalism would be like a marriage made in heaven, so a pertinent question that I try to answer, albeit in a roundabout way, is why things have turned out differently? Additionally, marketing today straddles the divide between personal life and global politics, from personal branding to nation branding, shaping how people see themselves and others.

A second reason for focusing on dimensional theories of power is that when applied singly they each shine a different light on a topic which illuminates some aspects. They can also combine to provide a more complex picture and so may be described rather like matryoshka dolls, given that the higher-level dimensions include the lower ones, as argued by John Gaventa (1980) in the Powercube, although the analogy doesn't quite fit as it fails to describe the cumulative and dynamic relations involved. Looked at singly,

Robert Dahl was wedded to positivism and empiricism in investigating overt instances of power in decision-making. Bachrach and Baratz on the other hand argued the need to look behind the scenes to enquire why pressing items never make it onto the agenda. In the context of marketing, while acknowledging some criticisms made by Trentmann, (2017), I thought it important to include J.K. Galbraith in this chapter because of the resonances of some of his arguments with those of Bachrach and Baratz and because some of the issues he put his finger on seventy years ago remain with us today, albeit in a greatly modified form.

Whilst the foregoing authors focused on the overt exercise of power, Steven Lukes argued that power is most effective in shaping the wants and desires of the individual. Where the concern of Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz was on the 'community-power debate' involving decisions in US city politics, Lukes discusses issues pertaining to pollution and the power of technology corporations which are conducive to discussion in the context of marketing and consumption. While all of these authors construct tight well-reasoned arguments, I found Lukes' (2021) as perhaps the most useful because of the insights one can gain from his extensive rebuttal of criticism of his earlier work and from his discussion of Bourdieu and Foucault, amongst others. Lukes closely argues his case and when he changes his mind, he provides a well-reasoned rationale for doing so, as when deciding that power is better described as a potential rather than as something that is exercised.

You may well ask, if this is book supposed to be concerned with a broadly dimensional argument then why include a chapter on Foucault? There are of course others whose explanations could have equally have featured, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari and Canetti. However, such has been the general influence of Foucault, that in the most recent edition of PRV Lukes (2021), devoted the best bit of a chapter in discussing Foucault, accepting some arguments and refuting others. Given this and also that a good deal of scholarship in power in marketing is informed by Foucault, I felt it was essential to include a chapter on his work.

I should apologize to readers of Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz and Lukes, who might be misled from the title that this book will consist of a series tight well-reasoned arguments. That what follows is more of a meandertale rather than an academic treatise is largely down to my magpie sensibility. Let's just say I find it hard to resist following an interesting thread or jumping from one topic to the next. So, for less flabby, more concise, and well-argued, discussions of power I suggest consulting amongst others, the research stream on consumer empowerment, including the contribution made by Gabriel & Lang, (2015), the perspective on power and culture by Janice Denegri-Knott and her co-authors, and the historical accounts developed by Mark Tadajewsk and colleagues. There are of course many others deserving of mention!

The title of this book ought perhaps to have been "A discussion of the potential usefulness of dimensional theories of power in the context of marketing by a guerrilla academic". This started life as one chapter (three) *Consuming Behaviour* (2003) and then expanded to the three final chapters in the second edition of that hapless text by the time I eventually finished it a mere ten years after I had promised to deliver it to the publishers.

When someone suggested that I submit the text to Bristol University Press, an editor kindly let me know some months later that the Board had liked it, but it was too long, so could I take out the last three chapters on power and make them into a separate book? Moral – don't always take advice from publishers!

To cut a long story short, I started work on a book with the provisional title of *Consuming Power* based on those three chapters in 2022 and thought that I had got a good way down the road when I received the unwelcome news from Bristol that the editorial Board had judged my resubmitted proposal for the *Consuming Behaviour* text as still too long, despite that I had cut out the three chapters on power and the proposal had been favourably reviewed. In light of which I decided that rather than let *Consuming Behaviour* die from death by a thousand cuts and the prospect that the book on power would likely go the same way, things weren't going to work out with Bristol. So I cut the painter, leaving me with not one, but two book projects to sort out. This was against the advice of my better half who thought I was mad and should have persevered with the publishers. As I saw it life was too short to hang around months or potentially years waiting for yet more rejections; I just wanted get on and get it off my plate. The project then took on a life of its own, probably for the worse, for one of the things I have noticed about my desire is that when I see a gap, I want to fill it. Consequently, chapter two, that should have been something like eighteen pages ended up five times that. The editor from Bristol had a point!

I may as well engage in some self-analysis to ask "myself" why I've bothered spending all this time on a doomed project that is cursed to lie added to the rest of the detritus that inhabits hyperspace for as long as the data centre allows, when I could have been living it up in Monte Carlo, swanned off to Tierra del Fuego, or even, God forbid, done something useful with my life? Those concerned with immortality argue that writing a book is a means to try to gain a sense of that security. That prospect fills me with a kind of horror as, although I "enjoy" writing, I can't say I look back on anything I have written with any satisfaction. I prefer to think of it as a long act of self-reflection/ deflection/ deception / destruction, but at least now that it's done there is a sense of completion.

I found some comfort in the piece by Jordan Ellenberg on the "Hawking Index", which in a tongue-in-cheek way, reads as a cautionary tale for any aspiring author of non-fiction. According to his measure of the "un-readability" of books that have been abandoned (based on when people stop highlighting sections on e-readers), only 6.8% got to the end of classics such as *Thinking Fast and Slow*, the classic by the Nobel prize winning Daniel Kahneman, whilst a miserable 2.4%, finished Piketty's, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*! Although Ellenberg was musing on the worthy titles that people decide to read on holiday beaches, if only to show off their gravitas, it seemed pretty clear to me that my only hope would be, as is the case for most academics, that it would be read mainly by those who wanted to rip it off, in which case they will be disappointed because there is not much original here. More likely perhaps is the engagement of those who are sufficiently aggrieved by its assertions or omissions.

This project has been like walking through a bog full of hidden holes. There is an arresting self-portrait by Salvator Rosa in the National Gallery in London which depicts him dressed

in academic garb with a set face that glares directly out at you no matter where you are seated. Towards the bottom left of the painting he is clutching a board on which is inscribed in Latin, 'Be silent, unless what you have to say is better than silence!' On top of its most obvious meaning, Rosa's injunction can be taken as a warning to be attentive, to try to avoid imposing one's preconceptions by stamping the *what is* in the mould of one's theoretical image of *what ought to be*.¹ While it is equally dangerous to believe that one can be objective, it is important at least to try to bracket one's assumptions.

That it would be a good idea develop those last three chapters of *Consuming Behaviour* into a book was somewhat dimmed when I read the epitaph for liberalism written by John Gray, that contemporary capitalism promises its labourers a better life on earth in a mythical future in which no one any longer believes (Gray, 2024: 133). For Gray, the one million and more "deaths of despair" that have occurred in the USA since the millennium were caused by the long-term loss of a way of life for the white working class.² I agree that the causes of such hopelessness are manifold. Key indicators that were once assumed to show constant improvement in the West, such as life expectancy³ and social mobility, are now flat or decreasing. Hamstrung by debt, many of the young live a hand to mouth existence in a cycle of precarity, holding out little prospect of the security of house and home that their parents assumed as a right, whilst those lucky enough to belong to the 'inheritocracy'⁴ hang around waiting for elders to die. With a fall in the working population, as more of the young declare themselves unfit for work⁵, coupled to a decline in fertility rates as the number of dependent senior citizens rises, civil society, whipped by a steady stream of dire comments from politicians and amplified daily by the media, appears fixated and enthralled by the ghastly prospect of a deluge of immigrants! Over all of this hangs the potential shroud of nuclear annihilation brought on by a series of "hot" regional conflicts and low-level engagements of sabotage in the West, and the once almost unimaginable but now increasingly certain prospect that the global climate balance will be further disrupted, as a number of 'tipping points' are breached in the near to medium future.

From the above, this is an unpropitious time to write about power and marketing. The dream of unending growth in the West was disrupted by the wave of globalisation that from the 1990s onward led to the mass relocation of industry to Asia and particularly to

¹ David Harvey (2001: 189) comments on how, "academic, intellectual and political interpretations of grassroots activism have ebbed, flowed and diverged without any clear or obvious relations to the activities themselves.

² He might also have mentioned that through Purdue Pharma, the Sackler family played a far from modest role in this through the egregious manner by which OxyContin was marketed (P.R. Keefe, (2017), The family that built an empire of pain. *The New Yorker*, 23rd October.

³ See, Buxton, J. (2024). National life tables – life expectancy in the UK: 2020 to 2022. UK Office for National Statistics, 11th January. See also, Vriend, M. & A. Gazzilo, (2024). Interpreting the latest life expectancy data. *The Health Foundation*, 15th February.

⁴ Filby, E. (2024). *Inheritocracy: It's time to talk about the bank of mum and dad*. Biteback Publishing.

⁵ Inman, P. (2024). Number of people in UK out of work due to ill health growing by 300,000 a year. *The Guardian*, 3rd October.

China. This has been accentuated by increasing income inequality in the middle classes, such that partners in rich law firms make millions, whilst inroads made by Artificial Intelligence lead graduates to struggle more than ever to find jobs, and those lucky enough to obtain an internship are paid little, if anything.⁶ As Gray sees it such inequality has provoked a populist reaction of a division between “the people” and the self-serving rich, metropolitan, expert “neoliberal elite”.

One of the privileges one enjoys as a paid-for academic is that one has – depending on funding – ready access to many, if not most of the journals one needs to consult if one is to do a half-decent job. When I retired from St Andrews University I was kindly offered a three- year honorary extension that provided me such access. When this expired and I sought to renew this with the ready assent of the Head of School, a rather dour ex-colleague who had been elevated to the post of Vice-Principal deigned that I was unworthy to be granted this facility. Consequently, since then I have had to go to rather extraordinary lengths to gain access to what ought to be freely available to enquiring scholars. For several years I have mostly not been able to access material published by Emerald or prestigious journals in the field such as the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising* or *Journal of Consumer Research* etc. The search for material has been time-consuming and frustrating. On one occasion when visiting the library at the University of Glasgow to obtain a day ticket I was asked to provide a list of what I required and was then told that if the same material was held at the central public library then I would have to go there, which I did not think a very considerate way to treat an ex-employee.

Enough whinging for now, as I should thank my lucky stars that I still had access to St Andrews’ library (not online of course), to JSTOR which has been invaluable resource and the growing number of open-access papers that are published online, which have been a boon for me that I recognise is a trial for their authors who must pay to publish. Sincere thanks are due to Stephen, Aliette, Kerry, Donncha and to Fergus and Micky-Joe who were on hand to occasionally read drafts along the way and to Peter who seemingly takes note all of this, and of course to my better half for stepping in when I simply had to get hold of something that was otherwise impossible for me to access. Particular thanks are due to Alan Bradshaw and his colleagues at Royal Holloway for their offer to support the launch of this book at some stage.

Thanks also to those ex-colleagues and fellow travellers that I have met along the way who became friends and have made life so interesting and enjoyable for me and especially to my ex-students, from many of whom I learned so much.

JD, Oct. 2025

⁶ David, J.E. (2015). Legal industry’s wealth gap: Rich lawyers get richer, CNBC, 27th April. <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/04/27/legal-industrys-wealth-gap-rich-lawyers-get-richer.html>

Chapter Outline

Part One: Sketching the Theoretical Landscape

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter first discusses understandings of power as power-over something or someone, in the sense of having someone in your power. This is supplemented by Steven Lukes' argument that power also refers more broadly to our capacity to effect an outcome or to receive it passively. Thus Potestas or 'power-over' as the ability to have others in your power is a sub-species that derives from potentia which is the capacity to act. There then follows a brief discussion of one-dimensional power which is illustrated through the example of Vladimir Putin and waiting time. The concept of power-over in marketing is discussed next followed by consideration of the relation between power and negative and positive ideas of freedom. Discussion then turns to capitalism and consumption and consideration as to whether the market might be understood as an unusual case of power-with.

Chapter Two: The Consuming Subject

Chapter two was written as a scoping device when I was still intending to write about the consuming subject of power. It is obviously not as relevant to consider relations between corporations, consumers, members of civil society and government as although the business corporation is regarded as a legal individual it is a very different individual to the human subject. The chapter ranges from a brief mention of homo economicus to explore psychological, sociological, psychoanalytic, mimetic and deconstructionist formulations of the subject which I try to illustrate with examples from consumption. More specifically discussion includes psychological theories from behavioural economics to behaviourism, social conformity and terror management; sociological theory which mainly focuses on Marx, to discuss his early argument for 'species being' and discussion of alienation and social character turning to consider his later work on ideology, fetishism and questions of value involving financialization and the machine, as a prelude to a brief discussion of social theorists of modernity and postmodernity; moving on to discuss Freud's conception of the conflicted subject in relation to processes of identification and social character, and then Lacan's revised theorisation of a subject consisting of real, imaginary and symbolic elements and the gap formed by the vital missing object a, concluding with a consideration of the Four Discourses; next, Girard's conception of the mimetic subject; and finally, a brief discussion of deconstructionism.

Chapter Three: Marketing and Consumer Research

Chapter three uses Kuhn's conception of paradigms as a (one-dimensional) device to consider aspects of power relations in the academic study of marketing. Power operates at different levels in the marketing academy and within the academy the study of marketing has been symbolically positioned close to the bottom rung on the ladder of management studies, which is in turn located at an equivalent point in relation to the social sciences. It thus comes as no surprise that like psychology, the academic study of marketing has sought to burnish its credentials by modelling itself on the image of the hard sciences and so on. Conceptual developments do not just serve the purpose of better helping the firm to attune its offering to its customers. Given the traditional lowly status of marketing, critiques of the 'marketing myopia' of businesses that are run by engineers, technologists, accountants, or sales managers, and developments such as the marketing concept and Service Dominant Logic not only emphasize the centrality of marketing ideas but lend ideological support to enable marketing managers to leverage their position in the 'C-suite'. Discussion moves to discuss mainstream marketing and places special emphasis on responses to the trauma of the early 1960s through developments of the societal marketing concept and social marketing and followed by relationship marketing, macromarketing and Service Dominant Logic. This is followed by brief sections on interpretive and critical marketing prior to a narrower discussion on mainstream, interpretive and critical approaches to consumer research.

Part Two: The Neoliberal Landscape of Power

Chapter Four: From Liberalism to Neoliberalism and Beyond

This chapter provides the broadest description of the institutional context in which issues pertaining to power, marketing and consumption are contested in what today is a threatened species, comprising remaining liberal democratic states that continue to follow the 'rules-based order' that emerged from the destruction of the Second World War, such that the polity consists of polyarchy, or representative government, and as places where the rights of the individual are guaranteed, and the economy is organised along capitalist lines. Here "liberalism" carries a very specific meaning pertaining to the system of thought that sprang up in the eighteenth century to proclaim the principle of individual self-determination in economic and political life, that eventually came to advocate liberal democracy in the political realm and the market in the economic realm, as the best guarantors of individual freedom and the social good. Key to this was a shift in power, from the despotism of the absolute ruler of the medieval age to the sovereign individual.

There follows a brief history of liberalism and a description of Dahl and Lindblom's argument for polyarchy, or representative democracy and of the institutional context a sphere populated by a range of actors in addition to homo economicus such as homo

politicus, homo juridicus and homo civicus. This is followed by a discussion of economic liberalism, and the re-engagement of discussion of homo economicus. The question is then asked as to whether or not democracy and capitalism have been a marriage made in heaven? Discussion then moves to neoliberalism ordoliberalism and anarcho-capitalism and on to consider the neoliberal state and the policies followed under neoliberalism relating to the market, individual choice, the introduction of quasi-markets, meritocracy, quality assurance and outsourcing. Neoliberalism is then discussed in relation to the changing face of the corporation and in relation to the transnational context in relation to changing conceptions of the human citizens and the emergence of the notion of the corporate citizen. The chapter closes with a discussion of neo-libertarianism.

Chapter Five: Some Consequences of Neoliberalism

The aim of this chapter is to consider some important issues arising from the previous chapter. An important question pertains to the extent to which the market has acted as an engine for prosperity, as the veritable goose that lays the golden eggs? Related to this, to what extent has the prosperity enjoyed by Europe and the USA relative to the rest of the world been down to the market? Additionally, what of the argument for 'trickle-down' used as the basis to justify the accumulation of vast wealth, on the basis that as the rich become ever richer, a proportion of their wealth will be transferred to the poor? Also, given the neoliberal focus on freedom, what meanings does this term have today and what has since happened to equality? Another question pertains to how the neoliberal conception of rationality has worked out in practice? Finally, it discusses how corporations were able to become so enormous in the neoliberal era as arguments for competition gave way to advocates of efficiency as the sole measure of consumer welfare.

Part III: Dimensional Theories of Power

Chapter Six: One-Dimensional Power

This chapter begins by describing Robert Dahl's views on freedom, homo economicus and his arguments for worker democracy to counteract the rising power of corporations. Dahl's theory of power is next outlined and then developed more broadly to consider relations between government, business and consumers, paying attention to the role of sectional and cause-related interest groups within a polyarchal system of governance. The McLibel case is used as a vehicle to illustrate the central importance of the law by means of SLAPP actions (Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation) to stifle dissent. The case also enables discussion of the treatment of the corporation as a legal individual and questions pertaining to its accountability of those who work for it. The case illustrates the difficulty of determining outcomes even in relatively simple situations. Finally, the case illustrates the limitations of the pluralist assumption that conflict will be represented within formal systems of representation. It is then argued that social

movement theories, and particularly the variant developed by Doug McAdam provides an alternative that is broadly in keeping with Dahl's aims.

Discussion shifts to address the tricky problem as to how to conduct research into power relations from this perspective, by outlining potential problems and offering some possible solutions. While arguing that there is scope for quantitative study of general questions, complexity is exemplified through discussion of the cases of Movimento Passo Livre (MPL) and of child labour in Bangladesh. Whilst complex, it is argued that event analysis, fact-checking and counterfactual reasoning can be helpful. A difficulty is that whilst activists and members of NGOs are often willing to cooperate with researchers corporate archives are not so readily available.

The chapter closes with a brief discussion of more diffuse social movements and of actions beyond the law.

Chapter Seven: The Second Dimension of Power

The two-dimensional understanding of power arose from the critique of Robert Dahl by Bachrach and Baratz (1975). Like Dahl they were troubled by the potential threat to democracy posed by the asymmetric influence of the rich on political decision making. While holding to Dahl's focus on the overt exercise of power as a capacity that enables A to gain power over B, they identified how A can work behind the scenes in various ways to prevent issues being raised in the public square that are antithetical to A's interest. A may achieve this in a number of ways, for instance, by creating and fostering values that are conducive to A's cause. For instance, the argument that taxes are good because they contribute toward a society that is more equal and fairer, as the money can be used to secure the health of the nation into its old age, is countered by that which claims that to seek equality is undesirable as humans are naturally different, and everyone should be self-reliant and stand up for themselves. A may use non-decisionmaking as a means to hamper and to blunt B's efforts to air arguments or opinions that are detrimental to A's interest. A range of options are available to A ranging at the extreme, from overt threats of intimidation and force to more covert means, employing the mobilization of bias, through the establishment of norms or by ensuring that topics raised for discussion in the public square are innocuous to their them. J.K. Galbraith's theory of power and his arguments about the revised sequence and the technostructure are discussed in this context.

Discussion then turns to research on non-decisionmaking in the context of marketing and consumption. There is no shortage of examples of corporations or of entire industries that have sought to divert attention from the damage caused to human and other sentient life and the environment by processes of extraction, production, distribution, use and disposal of their product; some keen to maintain a low profile, such as lead, asbestos and chemicals and others more attuned to the media spotlight such as tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceuticals and finance.

Over the years several aspects of the ‘playbook’ developed by PR agencies and product liability lawyers have come to light. Central to this is to seek to control the narrative by denying the ‘facticity’ of evidence that their product or service causes harm and by commissioning their own research which they can present as ‘independent’ to counteract this. Also discussed are the tactics used to suppress critics, which range from attempts to co-opt them by providing funds to more overt threats and intimidation. The discussion of the ‘playbook’ then folds into the concluding discussion on ‘post-truth’ and conspiracy theories.

Chapter Eight: Steven Lukes: the Third Dimension of Power

Steven Lukes (1974) applied the metaphor of faces to the explanations of power by Robert Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz, such that the latter revealed a previously hidden and more basic ‘face’ of power than Dahl, the power to ‘decide what is decided’.⁷ In the first edition of his book Lukes (1974) argued that by focusing on the overt exercise of power, one and two-dimensional explanations tell just half the story, and indeed to limit power to its exercise is misleading as this forecloses that power is a potential that need not be invoked for it to be effective, as power is at its most effective when it does not need to be exercised, especially when the willing compliance of others is gained through shaping their opinions and beliefs.

My intention in this chapter is not to rise to quickly to judgement but to summarize Lukes’ arguments as best I can and where possible to apply these in the context of marketing. Lukes addresses objections directly and is meticulous in rejecting some concepts in favour of others in his quest to pin down the elusive third dimension. Lukes clearly had his work cut out for him as the “face” of power he describes is conceptually as sheer and smooth as that of the most challenging rockface. Additionally, (to stretch the metaphor) his argument for a third dimension of power is squeezed between two rocks, considered too radical and nebulous by half by rational empiricists, whilst post-structuralists look askance at arguments for objectivity and mystification. For his third dimension to retain its grip Lukes, (2021) engages in detailed discussion of amongst others, James Scott, John Elster and Michel Foucault. Briefly, the challenge presented by Scott (1990) is that the third dimension does not exist because in reality suborned individuals are always resisting and indeed only intellectuals fall for the claim that they are somehow duped. Elster

Lukes (2021) must also deal with the critique by John Elster (1983) of an earlier version of PRV (Lukes, 1974), where the former argues that the behaviour Lukes identifies with the third dimension of power is better explained as an adaptive preference. In this explanation which is equally applicable to Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of power, adaptive preferences are a means to resolve the cognitive dissonance that arises from one’s

⁷ Lukes, (2021, 116).

inability to gain something generally considered desirable, perhaps through one's lack of wealth or social standing. Dissonance is overcome by refusing what one is refused, by 'trimming of desires to circumstances'. Rather than saying, "I can't afford it", (an expensive watch, a sportscar, to eat at an expensive restaurant) one reasons that "I don't want it because" (it's pretentious, a waste of money). Elster also questions whether rulers actually have the power to inculcate such beliefs, which he finds implausible. Lukes' response to Elster is that the third dimension of power does not involve direct manipulation and that beliefs and opinions can be influenced without "intelligent and intentional" action. Moreover, he cites evidence that such passive acceptance can be observed particularly amongst women in male-dominated societies. Although receptive to Bourdieu's (1984) arguments, Lukes finds this understanding of power rather too nebulous and is critical of the latter's attacks on Marxist arguments, aligns his argument for the third dimension of power more closely with Buroway's reading of Gramsci rather than Bourdieu.

Lukes' (2021) argument is meticulous, fortified by his responses to criticism of previous editions of PRV. Concepts are scaffolded into a structure so as to provide a firm basis for his argument for the third dimension of power as domination involving the willing compliance of those subjected to it. Thus domination will exist in situations where power is innocuous to the interests of the powerful that are extended or unharmed, whilst the interests of those subjected to power are harmed. (Lukes 2021, 91); from Spinoza, those who are dominated are, "less free to live as their nature and judgment dictate". How is one to explain the willing compliance of those who are dominated? This can only be brought about as a form of mystification, as a result of which judgement of the existence of the third dimension requires an objective viewpoint and a stable criterion on which to base this. Following discussion of identity and real interests as potential bases, he settles on real interests. There then arises the question of how to assess harm to an individual's real interests, and here he turns to the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who argued from Aristotle, and Marx, that certain capabilities make us 'truly human', such that for Lukes, domination occurs where the power of some affects the interests of others by restricting their capabilities for "truly human" functioning.

From the above, there is a lot to go through before one gets to discuss some that he has provided including that of 'surveillance capitalism' from Zuboff (2019) and in relation to the desire for a "European" nose which he mentions in Lukes, (2005).

Chapter Nine: Foucault on Power

Some suggest that Foucault opened a fourth dimension of power by exploring issues beyond those addressed by Dahl, Galbraith and Lukes.⁸ Whether or not that is so, his approach differs in that he delighted in challenging and subverting orthodoxy. For instance, in the series of seminars published as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault

⁸ See for instance Digesir (1992).

(2003) reversed Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means. By taking war, as opposed to the Philosophy of Right as the lens through which to view politics and power, Foucault argued that truth is not neutral, but is rather used as a weapon to justify an historically partisan victory; put plainly, the supposed "truth" of history is written by the victor (Foucault, 2004: 57). In so doing he wilfully placed himself on the margins, identifying himself with the sophists and against mainstream philosophy. That he did not trouble himself to discuss dimensional theories of power developed by American and British political theorists is to an extent understandable, given that his main point of reference was France. Even though he was elsewhere at the time, Foucault was deeply affected by the political upheaval that occurred in France in May 1968.⁹ His reflections on the events of May largely shaped his ideas on power as signalling a void in Marxist theory, pointing to the emptiness of abstract discussions of class, surplus value, consciousness and ideology, such that to focus narrowly on the sovereign power of the State misses out an entire nexus of power.

It can be somewhat confusing for the reader who like me is not fully conversant in French, that we have had to wait for translations of Foucault's work. This is not just down to the exigencies of translation, but rather because while some appeared rather expeditiously, others appeared many years after the original was published, notably the lectures bundled as *Society Must Be Defended*, delivered in 1975-1976, (first published in English in 2003) and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, delivered in 1978-1979 (published in English in 2008). *Discipline and Punish*, on the other hand was published in French in 1975, and appeared English translation relatively quickly in 1977, while the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published in French in 1976, appearing in translation in 1978. This may help explain the preponderance of articles on discipline and the repressive hypothesis by anglophone authors in the intervening period.¹⁰

Foucault (1982) divided his work into three periods. In the early stage he explored how versions of the subject were created by science and economics. He then turned to study the period in the seventeenth century when the emergent field of psychiatry developing dividing practices to sequester the mad from the sane, the sick from the healthy and criminals from "good boys" (Foucault, 1982: 777). His subsequent work on the development of disciplinary power and biopower can be seen as complements to this project as they explain how, in the modern nation-state, these forms of power came to be exercised over juridically free subjects. Then the broader question of how the government

⁹ François Ewald in Becker, Ewald, Harcourt, (2012).

¹⁰ Raffnsøe et al., (2019) argue that articles on discipline formed the first wave of Foucault-inspired commentary and research in organization studies. This proved very influential, because of its 'striking and graphic analysis and because of the potency of the image of the Panopticon. In the authors' view this led to an over-emphasis on discipline that had a distending effect on the literature. The authors note that the focus of *Discipline and Punish* is from 1840 to 1860AD and that by the time the book was published in 1975, discipline "no longer seemed natural and inevitable". They mention too that Foucault differentiated between the ideal of a disciplinarian society from the reality of a disciplined society.

of citizens changed in the transition from the 'raison d'état' of the police state, to the operation of power contemporary market societies. Foucault's last project focused on ancient Greece and the early Christian period to illustrate how individuals turned themselves into subjects of sexuality (Foucault, 1982: 778). Hiss status as an historian was controversial, rejected by many conventional historians who took a jaundiced view of his genealogical approach, as an "antihistorical historian" (Poster, 1982), accused of playing fast and loose with historical facts.

I begin by reprising concepts such as genealogy, the subject, governmentality, pastoral power and disciplinary power and biopower and by briefly discussing Foucault's critique of the philosophy of right. The next section discusses Foucault's contribution to the understanding of the government of the neoliberal subject and in particular in relation to the development of ordoliberalism and neoliberalism. This forms the prelude to a discussion of how Foucault's concepts have been deployed in relation to the government of the consumer and more generally in contributions to the field of marketing by providing revised accounts of the history of marketing thought, the 'responsibilization' of the consumer, consumer resistance. The chapter concludes by differentiating Foucault's work from dimensional theories of power.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The central question that informs this book is the extent to which dimensional theories of power can usefully be applied in contexts of marketing and consumption. Each theory presents a different face of power such that earlier explanations can be thought of as fitting into subsequent ones in the manner of matryoshka dolls. They owe their provenance to the political theorist Robert Dahl (1957), whose explanation was subsequently critiqued as too narrow by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) who pointed to a hidden face of power that Dahl had overlooked, succeeded by Steven Lukes' (1974) argument for the existence of a third, invisible face of power.

The account here takes a broadly dimensional approach to power as the first two sections of the book meander through questions of theory and context. Although overly long, to take a dimensional view necessarily means that some important theorists of power excluded and now that the project is almost finished, I am aware of some glaring omissions. Foucault's explanation is included, partly because some have argued that this presents a fourth face of power. Below I briefly describe power-over and power-with and dimensional theories of power, and then relations between power, freedom, and sovereignty, before describing this in the context of capitalism, consumption and marketing before concluding with a brief outline of chapters.

Power-Over and Power-With

We mostly think of power as power-over something or someone, in the sense of having someone in your power. Yet, as argued by Steven Lukes, power also refers more broadly to our capacity to effect an outcome or to receive it passively. From Spinoza Lukes distinguishes *potentia*, the general 'power of things in nature' such as for persons to exist and to act', from *potestas*, or being in the power of another.¹¹ Thus *Potestas* or 'power-over' as the ability to have others in your power is a sub-species that derives from *potentia* which is the capacity to act.¹²

Potentia can be linked to potential and the power to get things done. The importance of the collective achievement of joint goals is highlighted by the prominent psychologist Michael Tomasello (2008) who argues that human language itself arose from the system of visual signs used by individuals to summon help from others to achieve common goals.

¹¹ Lukes, (2021, 78).

¹² While I stick with Lukes' interpretation which is admirably clear, Vardoulakis (2018) offers a more complex explanation. *Auctoritas* is personal authority, *imperium*, the limits of juridico-political authority and *summa potestas* the most powerful authority. *Potestas* on its own refers to the power of the people and although *summa potestas* points to the authority that has the greatest power, this ultimately devolves to the multitude, as the most powerful violence does not come from the sovereign but from the people themselves. Ultimately it is the people who hold power, which is why Spinoza argued that democracy is the most primary institution. As Vardoulakis explains it *auctoritas*, *potestas* and *imperium* intersect and interact in a revamped and ontologized notion of power (*potentia*).

This idea of power as a disposition or as a capacity to get things done is shared by Hannah Arendt for whom power is, ‘the human ability not just to act but to act in concert’,¹³

There are affinities between potentia, power-with, capability and enablement, such that “Power-with” others provides the capability that enables one to succeed in a task that one could not otherwise have achieved. In addition to helping directly, for example in the situation where others crowd round to push the back of one’s car that has broken down, others may help by providing infrastructure, organization, materials, know-how, or some combination of these. For example, all were present in the joint initiative Project Shakti (Strength) launched by the Indian Government and Hindustan Unilever (HUL) in the year 2000, with the ambitious goal to encourage 100,000 women in Andhra Pradesh to become Shakti Amma (Empowerment Mothers) covering 500,000 villages and touching the lives of 600 million people. The idea was to empower women by raising their status through economic engagement in this traditional society where most lived below the poverty line¹⁴, whose freedom of movement and action were curtailed. However, as the vice-president of Unilever stated, this was not a CSR programme but rather a “business initiative with social benefits”.¹⁵ HUL would benefit from the establishment of a dense distribution network modelled along the lines of the Avon Lady. The women would invest R10,000 to buy stock from which they ought to make a return of 9% or 10%. Six years after the launch of the programme in 2006, 3,077 over 22 districts were reportedly in business, a figure that could either be interpreted as a slow but positive start, or as a disappointment in relation to the project’s overall aim.

On the plus side, in Thekkudan’s (2010) account, the ability to make their own money raised women’s self-confidence with many reporting that they were now better respected in their village communities, for instance when others used their first name and not their last name which is caste-related. Amma were “beauty agents” associated with health and hygiene but also with a “modern” notion of beauty evidenced by the brisk sale of “Fair and Lovely” skin-lightening cream. On the downside she concluded that, “freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life along with control over resources and decisions is not an evident result of the project.”¹⁶ One reason was because the business might be run in the name of the woman but was actually run by the men in her family her took orders and made deliveries because of women’s lack of freedom to move about. The work was laborious, requiring a collective effort taking up from two to eight hours a day and Ammas experienced problems created by unsold stock. Additionally it had the reverse effect of

¹³ Quote is from Arendt, (1970) in Lukes, (2021, 36).

¹⁴ Thekudden later mentions that many were housewives, teachers or shop-keepers, of which the latter two made me wonder about the extent to which they were living in dire straits.

¹⁵ Neath, G. & V. Sharma, (2008). *The Shakti revolution, Development Outreach*. World Band Institute (16 pp.).

¹⁶ Thekudden, (2010, 86).

that intended, by reinforcing to a certain extent the distinction between male space (public) and female (private). The initiative had also been objected to by private shopkeepers and offered no community benefit or involvement. Thekkuden argues that a major setback happened later when the state drew back from its support of the project. She concludes that overall, while HUL was able to build its brand in a previously untapped market, for the “power mothers”, “rather, the result was making vulnerable salesgirls’ unable to empower themselves in the absence of state mediation and support from civil society.¹⁷ In relation to the overall success of the project she comments that while the power of the corporation was questionable in this case, the power of the state was undiminished. As will be discussed later, this conclusion lends support to arguments that such initiatives are more likely to succeed when they are supported by the government and political establishment and downplays those that suggest that the corporation can step in to form a governmental role.

There are obvious similarities between the above and the empowerment literature in marketing¹⁸ and in social marketing. it fits well with one of the two descriptions of critical social marketing espoused by Gordon (2019, 86), as ‘the impact of commercial marketing and business on society.¹⁹ While there are obvious parallels, the bulk of this book is concerned with dimensional theories of power-over, based on Dahl’s (1957) A/b conception of power and not with social-psychological explanations of empowerment.²⁰ That said as some of the examples in this book make clear, it by no means simple to disentangle ‘power-with’ from ‘power-over’. In an explanation that takes a distinctively Hobbesian complexion, the power of the sovereign can be thought of as deriving from that portion of sovereignty leant to them by each of their subjects. Market liberals contend in a broadly similar manner that the corporation derives its power from the “votes” cast in its favour each time a customer pays for its services, although this is a very strange form of ‘power-with’ as each individual is presumed to act entirely in their self-interest. The argument at the heart of the marketing concept is thus that in the long run the survival of even the largest corporation lies in the hands, or rather pockets of its customers.

To think of power as power over someone, or something, seems commonsensical given early experiences at the hands of, or in the shoes of, the school bully. This accords with definitions such as Max Weber, for whom power is, ‘the probability that an actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance,

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 9,

¹⁸ Denegri-Knott, (2019); Kamin et al., (2022).

¹⁹ The second part of the description that states the aim to ‘critically analyse(s) social marketing theories, concepts, discourses and practice, to generate critique, conflict and change that facilitates social good’, is more indistinct.

²⁰ See for instance, research inspired by Perkins, D. and Zimmerman, M. (1995),

regardless of the basis on which this probability rests',²¹ or Denis Wrong (1980) who conceives of power as an asymmetric, intentional social relation involving, 'the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others'. Wrong identifies factors other than sheer force, such as manipulation, persuasion and authority as the principal means by which power obtains its effects, spending most of his time discussing authority relations involving the resources or status of the powerful.

Dimensions of Power

The idea that power has different faces or dimensions derives from the critique of the political theorist Robert Dahl's work by Bachrach and Baratz (1962). In the early 1960s Dahl became concerned by a claim that is also widespread today, which is that US politics was run in the interests of a hidden ruling elite. As an empiricist Dahl was concerned by the lack of evidence to substantiate this claim which he then set out to study in the local city of New Haven. Dahl's team measured the preferences of different groups in the local political system and quantified the extent to which the preferences of one group prevailed over those of others. From this research programme which proved to be highly influential, Dahl's team rejected the hypothesis that politics was governed by a shadowy elite, but was pluralistic, such that different groups dominated others in different contexts.

For Dahl, power is a causal relation between two individuals such that, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to something that B would not otherwise do".²² Although no-one could get inside my head to scrutinize my intentions, a reasonable person might have inferred that as a child I ate the parsnips I hated because my granny told me to do so. Dahl's causal definition follows from Hobbes' idea of sovereign power, which Stuart Clegg (1989) describes as, "a place of will, a supreme agency towards which others would bend". Power is conceived of by Dahl in positivist terms as something directly observable and measurable. The roots of this go back to classical mechanics and Dahl, who was keen on collecting facts and assessing probabilities in relation to power used a comment he made to his students prior to the mid-term break as an example; "If you don't do the requisite reading, you'll fail the exam"! He described how the power of the teacher could be measured as the difference between the probability that his students would have done the reading before they received this information, against the amount they would do after they have received the news.

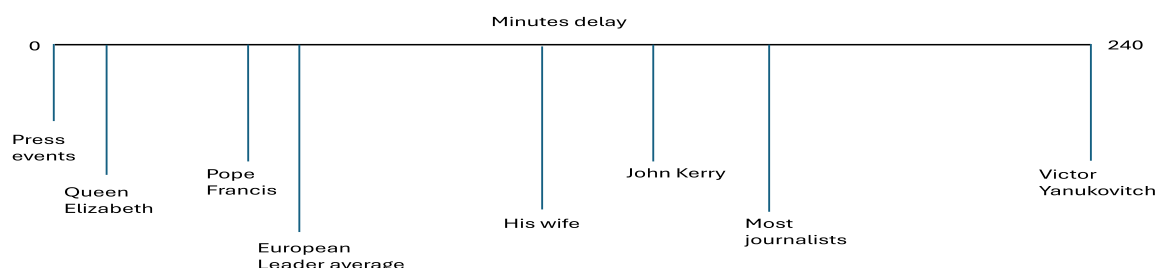
Waiting time is a ubiquitous but little-referred to aspect of the consumer experience. Waiting can be frustrating, particularly if one does not know how long for and supplicants, such as those requesting healthcare, welfare support or political asylum often have to endure lengthy and frustrating application procedures and cancelled appointments, as do

²¹ Weber, (1978, 53).

²² Dahl, (1957).

those of us who are trapped into using inappropriately named ‘consumer support services.’²³ The length of time used by the diminutive tyrant Vladimir Putin to signify his status by keeping visitors waiting is a case in point. That Putin could be on time is testified to by the fact that he turned up promptly to organized press conferences.²⁴

Putin Power



That he kept the Queen of England waiting for fourteen minutes might not seem particularly long but would have been thought impolite, and even a slight, given she worked to a minute-by-minute schedule. It seems that the Queen got off lightly compared to most European leaders and journalists, never mind his long-suffering wife, who reputedly had to wait for up to two and a half hours while they were dating. Putin’s blatant disregard shown to US Secretary of State John Kerry seemed unfathomable, until one learned that this was a deliberate snub at a time of frosty relations with the USA over Syria. His humiliation of the supplicant ex-Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovitch who had to wait over four hours, could not have been made plainer.

Stewart Clegg (1989) describes episodic power in organizational contexts where managers make workers use a system they would not otherwise use. This relational form of “power over” or causal power cannot be identified in the absence of resistance. This calls to mind the lamentation of Bartleby the scrivener, “I would prefer not to’. In the context of consumption there is the palaver attached to air travel where “travel assistants” ensure that we have first checked-in online and downloaded our boarding pass, then direct us to weigh our bags and attach the luggage tag, then to join the queue where we are issued with another boarding pass, and then onwards to place our bags onto the moving belt, all in the interest of “convenience”. As Hobbes (1651) knew very well, language is a slippery thing!²⁵ Lukes (2021) mentions a positive aspect of power-over in the role played by parents to rid their children from bad habits, which was never easy but is much more challenging today given the long reach of social media into childhood.

²³ As I write this I have just spent 48 minutes on the phone to my local district Council trying to order a recycling bin, starting at number 34 in the queue.

²⁴ Walker, Shaun, (2015). Why is Vladimir Putin always late. *The Guardian*, 11th June.

²⁵ See for example Ch. XI, of *Leviathan*, (1651) “On the slipperiness of manners’.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) subsequently critiqued Dahl for ignoring a “second face” of power which shapes the political agenda by restricting what is discussed to what is innocuous to the powerful by preventing issues from entering the political arena. What they call non-decisionmaking can be achieved through the “mobilization of bias” which can involve silencing potential opponents by co-opting them.

Steven Lukes (1974) argued that Dahl’s ‘one-dimensional’ understanding and the ‘two-dimensional’ account by Bachrach and Baratz’ are similar, in that each conceives of power as deliberate and intentional, although in the latter case it may operate covertly. Lukes warned others to beware of two common fallacies in studying power. The exercise fallacy is when one assumes that power is overt and that it only occurs when it is operationalised, as for instance, when Elon Musk frustrated Ukrainian offensive plans by switching off the Starlink system.²⁶ Power is better thought of as a disposition or as a potential that may or may not be exercised; Musk could equally cut off access to half the world or indeed all of it if he chose to. The vehicle fallacy describes the situation where power is equated with the amount of resource one has at one’s disposal. The most (in)famous example is perhaps the ‘McNamara Fallacy’, so named because during the 1960s Vietnam war, Robert McNamara modelled US strategy as a set of equations, leading to a focus on tracking numbers, so that the US generals came to believe they were winning based largely on the massive tonnage of ordinance dropped. This fallacy has since been observed in relation to quality assurance and widespread use of targets in healthcare.²⁷

In developing the argument for a third dimension of power Lukes (1974) took from Gramsci the idea that the willing consent of those dominated can be gained by manipulating their beliefs and preferences; ‘(t)he supreme exercise of power consists of getting others to have the desires you want them to have’.²⁸ From this what people say cannot be trusted as they, ‘do not know their own minds...it is precisely the belief that they falsely think that they do which is the locus of the problem of hegemony’.²⁹ Lukes acknowledged that this presents a formidable challenge to the researcher as conflict is not even covert but is replaced by willing compliance, and how this is obtained may not be intentional. How then to detect if power is at work? For Lukes this necessitates the adoption of an external perspective from which to judge the effects of power against the real interests of the individual.

Lukes’ ideas were further developed by John Gaventa (2006) and colleagues through the Powercube, which describes power in its three-dimensional aspects as visible, hidden and invisible. Thus ‘invisible power’ may involve ‘self-reproducing social processes’ by

²⁶ Roulette, J.; C. Bryan-Low & T.Balmforth (2025). Musk ordered shutdown of Starlink satellite service as Ukraine retook territory from Russia. *Reuters*, 27th July.

²⁷ See O’Mahonly, (2017).

²⁸ Lukes, (1974: 23).

²⁹ Lukes, (20221, 3).

which the thoughts and actions of both the powerful and of the powerless are conditioned by pervasive norms. If anything, Gaventa's explanation of invisible power resonates more strongly with the conception of power developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) than does that of Lukes (2021).³⁰

Power-Over in Marketing

The mainstream literature in marketing embraced a definition of power early on that was broadly similar to that developed by Dahl, (1957) as a base to study dyadic power in marketing channels. Authors discussed the theorisation and measurement of power (Beier & Stern, 1969; El-Ansary & Stern, 1972) and its application to franchising (Hunt & Nevin, 1974), the purchase of advertising agency services (Farrell & Shroder, 1998) and the study of channel conflict (Gaski, 1984). Influence features as an important construct in this literature as the generally agreed definition of power is, 'the ability of one individual or group to control or influence the behaviour of another'.³¹ Another difference from Dahl's definition is that authors accept that a firm can have power without using it, thus recognising that power is a potential that need not be exercised.³² Empirically, marketers quickly discovered that the 'non-coercive' bases of power developed by French and Raven (1959) comprising reward power, legitimate power, expert and referent power, were almost impossible to distinguish in an empirical setting, thus opting for a simple differentiation between coercive and non-coercive power.³³

Over and above this are literatures on topics ranging from advertising influence and ideology,³⁴ to brand power,³⁵ and consumer resistance.³⁶ At a more general level marketing academics have long focused on the importance of intra-firm power relations by arguing that business is better off if it is run by marketers and not engineers, or accountants nor those in sales (Levitt, 1960; Auh & Merlo, 2012). In more modern parlance these can be thought of as specific discourses that legitimise a particular structure of power, by specifying roles and responsibilities and authorising some behaviours while ruling others out. For instance, when working on a research project I observed Levitt's (1960) point first hand, that businesses run by engineers have an interest in

³⁰The Powercube. <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/>

³¹ Hunt & Nevin, (1974, 186). A slightly modified version is in Frazier, (1983, 158) 'the ability of one channel member to influence decision variables of another channel member, a potential for influence on another firm's beliefs and behaviour'.

³² Frazier, (1983, 158).

³³ See for instance, Beier and Stern, (1969) and Hunt and Nevin (1974).

³⁴ See for instance the exchange between Pollay (1987) and Holbrook, (1987).

³⁵ See for instance, Aaker, (2014)

³⁶ Peñaloza & Price, (1993).

demonstrating their technical proficiency by building a better mousetrap.³⁷ When I started the project buyers were instructed by designers to procure expensive state-of-the-art components. A year later when a new executive team gained led by accountants was installed it decreed that engineers move from their office to work alongside sales to produce an entry-level product at an extremely competitive price. Several engineers left the business in disgust, whilst those who remained were required to reverse engineer each product, with the result that state-of-the-art components were replaced with cheaper but more robust alternatives used by mass electronics manufacturers.

The above might be understood as illustrative of the operation of the circuit of power model devised by Stewart Clegg (1989) where individualistic and episodic power relations are nested within the wider social system where the rules of the game are contested that facilitate requisite actions and specify role requirements. The logic informing marketing discourse is that by identifying and serving customer needs better than the competition the marketing-oriented firm will be more profitable than others. An influential stream of research developed to prove this point by operationalising and measuring “marketing orientation” (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). Taken to its logical conclusion, the most customer-centric business will be the most profitable, leading ultimately to monopoly and what might be termed the ‘Amazon paradox’, given that near-monopolies can exercise virtually unlimited power over their customers.

Not all discourses are equal as some are tighter and better specified and have more pressing real world implications than do others. In democracies much of the action pertaining to the rules of the game occurs in the arcane context of legal discourse where those found guilty must pay a literal price. Denegri-Knott and Tadjewski, (2017) cite Foucault, who pointed to the ‘ceaseless reciprocity between the legal system, the market system and power’ (Foucault, 2008, 164). While discourses of accounting and engineering employ specific rules and procedures that are inculcated into their subjects through years of education and training on the job, they also promote the specific world views mentioned above. More nebulous are the ‘tribal’ discourses invoked to frame the actions of those who are labelled as voluntary simplifiers or culture jammers (Cherrier, 2009). At a still-wider level there is the discourse embedded in the overall language system. Employed as a lingua franca by many, to write in English has a particular resonance for those once colonised by the British who were at one time punished for speaking their own language. Literary scholars such as Brian Friel and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have illustrated the violence done to indigenous systems of meaning and the alienation that results from having to speak in a foreign tongue.³⁸ On the plus side Ngũgĩ

³⁷ This example is drawn from an electronics company I was involved with for two years as part of a study into the implementation of Manufacturing Resource Planning (MRP2) systems when at Manchester Business School. Geoff Lockett, Peter Barrar and Ian Tanner were the grantholders and Fiona Wilson and Eileen Polding were also joint researchers (ESRC, ACME).

³⁸ For instance, Friel, B. (1981) *Translations*, London: Faber and Faber; *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Allen Lane.

wrote that English provided support to anti-colonial intellectuals who appropriated its vocabulary of liberation and emancipation and brought it back to Africa.³⁹ Varman and Belk (2009) have argued in the context of India that collective memory of colonisation provided a resource to mobilize against global corporations.

Given that the marketing is not suspended in space but is embedded in an economic and social context it is necessary to briefly discuss freedom and sovereignty and indeed capitalism, the meaning of which can be taken for granted.

Power and Freedom

Freedom is important to this discussion because it is intimately related to power and there is more than one idea of freedom. Power is most often discussed in negative terms in the sense of getting rid of the obstacles that encumber the individual. Robert Dahl adhered to a liberal understanding as *freedom from*, whilst for those in the civic republican tradition such as Quentin Skinner and Phillip Pettit, freedom consists of *non-domination* by arbitrary power. The difference can be illustrated by the example of a slave who is allowed freedom to do as he pleases by his master. In the liberal understanding he is free as his choices are unconstrained, whereas in the republican view he is still dominated as his master may at some point change his mind. Both these negative forms of freedom (*freedom from*; *non-domination*) can in turn be differentiated from positive freedom. Pushed to an extreme in this understanding, the truly autonomous self-determined individual will be free from any constraint, construed as “interference”, imposed by family, community or government.

From the time of Adam Smith, liberal economists such as Milton Friedman (1962) emphasized the value of negative freedom, to think what I want, say what I want, write what I want and do what I want, whether to take drugs, skydive, engage in risky sex or die when I choose, without fear of hindrance from the “nanny state”. For Friedman, the objective, “is to preserve the maximum degree of freedom for each individual separately that is compatible with one man’s freedom not interfering with other men’s freedom”. At the extreme, the demand for negative freedom is thus expressed in a radical form as the demand for freedom from any constraint whatsoever. A particularly virulent form of this view is manifested in the (Dis)-United States of America, through moves by some of the richest men on the planet to unravel the central State institutions that provide security and safety for many, and to destroy democracy itself.⁴⁰

The radical slant of negative freedom can be argued to provide an ideological bolster for the powerful which traps the powerless in a cage that is just as solid as its iron

³⁹ See Derbyshire, J. (2025) Can language ever be objective? *Financial Times*, 29th July.

⁴⁰ See, Slobodian, Q. (2024). *Crack-up capitalism: market radicals and the dream of a world without democracy*, UK: Penguin.

counterpart. While the vice-President of the “land of the free” lectured Europeans on their lack of “free speech he omitted mention of “freedom” in his own land to brazenly lie, incite violence, use military assault weapons with deadly effect, or the ‘freedom’ granted to children to learn the best way to kill themselves from social media feeds. Timothy Snyder (2024) offers an interesting take on this by arguing that negative freedom operates as an alibi for the powerful, providing them with license that enables them to dominate and coerce others. Expressed in economic terms negative freedom specifies an absence, signalling that as economic actors we should be left equally alone to do as we please. This shrouds a history of exploitation of the powerless. The fiction by which market forces are assumed to spontaneously equilibrate exculpates the individual from having to think of the actual situation of the real people involved and the consequences of their actions.

The Harm Principle

While John Stuart Mill (2001) acknowledged the importance of negative freedom, he cautioned that individual freedom is allowable to the extent that it does not harm others; “(t)he only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it”.⁴¹ Harming another is to make them worse off than they would otherwise have been.

All governments place some limits on the exercise of negative freedom by individuals when their actions threaten potential harm to others. Given that the harmful effects of passive smoking are now well understood, one might expect that some form of regulation that limits the effects of tobacco smoke on non-smokers. However, regulation has gone well beyond this so that in the UK, advertising for cigarettes has been banned since 2016 and cigarettes must be hidden from view at the point of sale and packaged in standardised plain packaging. In the USA, shopkeepers must check the photo ID of customers aged under 27 and cannot sell cigarettes in packs of less than twenty. In the UK ownership of firearms is monitored and enforced by the local police who apply stringent checks such as confidential character assessments; In the USA the bizarre situation has arisen that any individual can buy a military style AR-15 rifle at the age of 18, while to buy a beer they will have to wait until they are 21. Friedman argued against government regulation of smoking, recommending the market-based solution of developing nicotine pills and cigarette substitutes. He also wrote encouraging reviews for anti-gun control books *More guns, less crime* (Lott, 1998) and *The Bias Against Guns* (Lott: 2003).

How then should a liberty-minded person behave? There is no clear answer to this question. Consider that in the face of a highly infectious and deadly epidemic, a vaccine has been discovered, but a close member of your family refuses to be inoculated. Should

⁴¹ Mill, (1859, 17).

they be free to do so? Vaccines are only effective if they achieve herd immunity. Millions of parents in industrialized countries refused to have their infants vaccinated with the MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella) vaccine due to the mistaken belief that this leads to autism. According to one historical review effects of contracting measles alone for children aged under five were significant; 0.3% died, 20% had to be hospitalised, 12% suffered from acute diarrhoea and over 8% contracted pneumonia. What should a liberty-minded person do? On the one hand if they side with Milton Friedman, then they would regard this as fundamentally a question for individual judgement. On the other hand the “harm” principle suggests that one should consider the likely harm done to others by refusing to be vaccinated. Given that measles is highly contagious and that one person can infect 9 out of 10 others, to achieve herd immunity, 95% of the population would need to be inoculated. Every individual who decided not to get the vaccine would reduce the chance of achieving herd immunity and so would increase the risk to others.

Positive Liberty

While liberal economists make much of negative freedom, positive freedom, or freedom to developed by Isaiah Berlin, is less spoken about. This questions the unitary nature of the individual subject presumed by proponents of negative freedom and problematizes the idea of free choice. Positive freedom conceives of the subject as comprising two selves, one of which is driven by base desires, while the other follows the true interests of the individual. Consider that I decide to drive down a road and then to turn right at one junction and left at the next, before pulling over to stop. Up until now my actions seem perfectly free. But when I tell you that I took this route because I wanted to go to the tobacconist to salve my craving for cigarettes, even though I want to give up smoking. There are two “selves” at work here where the one that dominates is that which drives my craving for cigarettes. In this positive conception of freedom, true freedom of choice would involve self-determined engagement with my rational self-interest in line with survival, to quit smoking. As we shall see later a similar logic informs Kotler’s (1972) argument for the societal marketing concept which distinguishes pleasing products that provide short-term satisfaction and long-term harm, from salutary and desirable products that serve the long-term consumer interest. It also informs a variant of social marketing theory that works in the purported interests of public welfare in producing campaigns against racism and drug abuse. This is also the logic that informs Kahneman’s (2011) appeal that the consumer should be protected against firms that manipulate System 1 processing linked to the immediate satisfaction of desire and to reduce the effectiveness of System 2 processing that acts in preserving their true interests.

Capitalism

It is important to discuss the relation between markets and the Market, or capitalism. Language can be a source of confusion and a bone of contention, evident in liberal theorist Norman’s (2018) reference to “markets”, while critical theorists Fraser and Jaeggi

refer only to “capitalism”.⁴² That many if not all liberals eschew “capitalism” as a descriptor may be understandable given this term was first used by Karl Marx and appears nowhere in Adam Smith.⁴³ Marx argued that capitalism is a pre-requisite for the establishment of communism by maximising the productive force of the economy.⁴⁴ Today it is lambasted by critics as the source of all of society’s ills comprising a cold, ruthless, rapacious system of exploitation that thrives on discontinuity, disruption, conflict and violence. From a Marxist perspective critics have focused principally on the effects of capitalism on the worker, describing it as an abstract system that involves processes of separation, or the alienation of resources required to satisfy needs as private property; the imposition of work and the separation of work from leisure; and the profit motive by which the surplus value of production is expropriated from the worker.⁴⁵

Bernand Braudel, a prominent critic of capitalism argued, *contra* liberal and Marxist positions, that capitalism is the anti-market. Braudel likened economic organization to the storeys on a house, the first of which consists of “material life” consisting of basic consumption; the second storey, consists of “economic life” and has something in common with Polyani’s conception of a marketplace, as prices are public and profits amount to little more than a wage for the seller. What is notably different is that Braudel’s final storey, scaffolded on top of economic life is ‘capitalism’, which is the zone of the anti-market, an opaque world involving the monopoly concentration of wealth and power. If true, Braudel’s vision of capitalism would be entirely antithetical to Adam Smith’s view of the market

If capitalism is not entirely about markets that are regulated by a price system, then what is it about? It seems that liberals and critics agree that inexorable growth and accumulation spurred by the profit motive are intrinsic elements of capitalism, involving a

⁴² Norman (2018: 290-293) only refers to capitalism when referring to Karl Polyani’s account.

⁴³ Norman (ibid.) writes that if we think of capitalism as, “the combination of open markets and industrial corporations functioning as independent institutions and controlling autonomous pools of labour”, then this only came into existence eighty years after publication of the *Wealth of Nations*.

⁴⁴ Eagleton, (2018: 56). Eagleton offers a gruesome comment from Marx’s work on India, that there is progress in capitalism but this is like a hideous god who drinks nectar from the skulls of the slain. Discussion of capitalism and socialism is on pages 57-59.

⁴⁵ For example, Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) draw on Marx to argue that the exploitation of labour power is more fundamental than is the market to capitalism, as this provides the engine that creates surplus value through a vampiric system of exploitation and expropriation. While Harvie and Milburn, (2011) make a similar point, I found some of their argument rather shaky in places, for instance, in respect to their claim that unlike slave and serf societies capitalism swallows the whole of a persons’ identity (Harvie & Milburn, 2011: 39). In my view there is an important difference between compliance and coercion. The slave lives in a state of coercion, controlled by violence, whereas the worker voluntarily complies with requests made by her employer (Bales et al., 2009: 31). While this may seem simple, criminals have muddied the waters by engineering situations where coercion masquerades as compliance. Women are induced into heavy alcohol and drug use as a means of ensuring their continued dependency on their traffickers. For instance, UK police authorities have mentioned cases where they have rescued trafficked women from brothels, who have insisted that they have been working voluntarily. In such situations the threat of violence is masked as it is directed not at the individual but their family members

dynamic process where firms control the transformation of inputs into commodities and the labour process involved in this and invest profit into a new cycle of production. While arguing that capitalism and markets are intertwined, Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) acknowledge that markets for consumer goods existed in non and precapitalist societies and appear in a variety of forms. In their account capitalism is a system where markets play a central role, involves private ownership of the means of production, a class division between owners and producers, a free labour market, “the dynamic of capital accumulation premised on an orientation towards the expansion of capital as opposed to consumption, coupled with an orientation toward making profit instead of satisfying needs”.⁴⁶ While they offer an expanded description of capitalism, linked to expropriation, imperialism and racism, their assertion, “making profit instead of satisfying needs’ would no doubt be vigorously contested by mainstream marketing theorists which potentially leads down the theoretical rabbit hole that capitalism manufactures false needs.”⁴⁷

Embeddedness

Robert Dahl (1993) and Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) were each influenced by Polyani’s (1944) argument, that capitalism does not go “all the way down” but is embedded in an institutional context. Given the creative destructiveness of the marketplace a pure market-based society could not reproduce itself, so Polyani argued that economic processes should be understood in the context of wider social relations, noting in a pithy turn of phrase that in traditional societies the economy was embedded in social relations, whereas in capitalism, social relations have become embedded in the economic system.

By comparison with the USA, Robert Dahl (1993) commented favourably on the balance struck in Nordic societies between and political and economic power that then prevailed when equality between citizens was regarded as an important value. Fraser has developed a more thoroughgoing notion of embeddedness which focuses on the shifting boundaries between capitalism and the non-economic spheres it depends on, comprising social reproduction, the polity and nature. Compared to Marxist explanations where crises come from within the capitalist economy, in this explanation they arise from the boundaries that divide it from its non-economic conditions. Markets can be fickle and dangerous and capital accumulation, “depends on a precarious and complex balance between commodity relations and other forms of social organization” (Jessop, 2001: 219). Thus, market society developed as a corrective to harness the strengths of the market while striving to contain its destructive potential through regulations that sustain capital accumulation. Fraser argues that in the period of state-managed capitalism what she calls the ‘states of the core’ began to assume some of the costs of reproduction,

⁴⁶ Fraser & Jaeggi, (2018: 15).

⁴⁷ I discussed the vexed arguments around the question of false needs by J.K. Galbraith, William Leiss and Jean Baudrillard in the first edition of *Consuming Behaviour* (Desmond, 2003).

promoted full-employment, developed partnerships with unions, compensated for market failures, “and generally disciplined capital for its own good”.⁴⁸

Consumption

Rather than trying to define consumption in some esoteric way, for instance, by viewing it as destruction (which of course it is), it can be useful to reflect briefly on the scope and variety of consumption practices in our daily lives. Consumption takes up much of our time and includes personal grooming, preparing and eating food, doing housework, browsing and shopping for food, durables or phones, travelling for leisure and for work, holidays, sporting equipment, concert tickets, cars, pornography, sex, and (for some) sex and so on, never mind talking about them with others. It can be useful to check our consumption against an average in which case it seems that apart from sleeping and working (which take up around sixteen hours a day), the “average” adult in the UK spends about fifty minutes grooming, an hour travelling, two hours preparing and eating food, two, to two and a half hours watching TV, and fifty minutes on their computer. Time spent shopping is not accounted for separately but is parcelled in with activities such as household work, care, DIY and gardening, which in a sample period in 2024 amounted to three hours forty minutes a day for women, about an hour more than spent by men. This highlights differences based on gender, age and social-class. Those who are economically inactive, ill or who stay at home during the working day report watching more TV. That consumption takes up a huge amount of our time is starkly obvious when respondents report that on average they spent just thirty minutes a day socialising with others.⁴⁹

While figures such as those mentioned above should be taken with a large pinch of salt, they nevertheless provide a benchmark for us to reflect on our own daily consumption patterns. From the above, we spend much of our time either buying or consuming commodities, leading us to engage with all sorts of sizes and types of organization from the people with whom we have personal dealings, such as the local ‘one-man-band’ we are at the mercy of when our washing machine or heating system breaks down, or when our roof tiles fall off and the local newsagent or greengrocer, (vanishing breeds), to remote engagements with those herded into call-centres, who labour joylessly on behalf of “our” bank, broadband “provider”, holiday company, utility, and so on. Am I alone in beginning to prefer the occasional rudeness and pomposity of the local electrician or plumber who assumes that I am an ignoramus who needs to be informed about what is really going on in the world and forgive their transgressions (even though they drive me mad when they

⁴⁸ Fraser & Jaeggi, (2018, 75).

⁴⁹ Office of National Statistics (2023). *Time use in the UK: 23 September to 1 October 2023* : Average daily time spent by adults on activities including paid work, unpaid household work, unpaid care, travel and entertainment. Experimental statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/timeuseintheuk/23septemberto1october2023>. I have rounded up data to make it more intelligible.

don't show up when they said they would or when the blasted thing breaks down again), over the platitudinous 'have a wonderful day' on repeat from their remote AI enabled counterparts, following a failed attempt to resolve a simple issue?

The Market: An Unusual Case of Power-With

Earlier I briefly mentioned Lukes' discussion of *potentia* and *potestas* which he borrowed from Spinoza. From this I suggested that it might not be going too far to suggest that the *potestas* or power-over the individual customer enjoyed by the corporation derives from the *potentia* or power-with of the multitude. There is something of a resemblance between the idea that the power of the corporation rests ultimately on that lent to it by its customers, and Hobbes' argument that citizens lend a part of their sovereignty to government to form a mandate. If Leviathan arises and assumes its gigantic form from the will of the citizenry, should there not also be a collective term aside from that of the corporation, to describe the constructions assembled by consumers? Where citizens can club together to advance the common weal, the consumer envisaged as *homo economicus* is supposed to act solely in their self-interest. Self-interest can obviously be involved in instances of power-with, as in the situation I mentioned earlier that when a car broke down and blocked the road, it didn't take long for a group of motorists to band together to clear it out of the way. But in such situations all of the motorists are working towards a common goal, whereas power in the marketplace is blind, constituted unintentionally by transactions between strangers who are mutually indifferent to each other.

There may be no need to depend on Spinoza, given that Adam Smith pointed out that it should go without saying, that as the end of all production is consumption, so the firm should serve the interests of the consumer. Spinoza after all was writing about the immanence or otherwise of God and his call for a radical democracy based on the 'multitude' has been argued by radical commentators as the antithesis of representative democracies that are run by political elites co-opted by big business.⁵⁰ The marketing concept might better be expressed as a common-sense regard by those in business for the interests of those on whom their own interest depends. In a market society it is ultimately the shifting of demand that acts as a spur to keep business from doing what it wants to do in the dog-eat-dog market-place, which is to create a monopoly. Thus while there is clearly an asymmetry between the resources that are at the command of the individual and the corporation, due to the creative destruction of capitalism, the argument is that in the long-run the market will prevail, which does not rule out all kinds of malpractice in the short run however long that will be. As anyone in the role of customer knows who has been at odds over an issue with some corporate monolith, the experience can more often result in a sense of powerlessness and annoyance. At the heart of the marketing concept is the presumption that the "long run" the survival of even the largest corporation lies in the hands, or pockets of its customers. In the "short-run", all manner

⁵⁰ See Large, (2014).

of collective enterprises have emerged to work in the interests of consumers, some formally endorsed by the state. Another set of groups has formed based on the perceived responsibility of consumers for the wellbeing of people animals and the environment, on whom their consumption depends.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is another term whose meaning cannot be taken for granted. In seeking to justify the need for a sovereign, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651) argued that this figure is required because otherwise society would be a war of all against all. To avoid society degenerating it was necessary for each individual to cede some of their power to a sovereign, Leviathan. In *The Sovereign Individual* (1997) by James Davidson and William Rees-Mogg (no, not *that* one, his father) expressed a much more radical vision of sovereignty. They argued, presciently in some respects, that such is the power of the current wave of information technology that it will sweep away the institutions that are currently taken for granted as underpinning our security, from Leviathan itself, in the form of national governments, to central banks and state-administered healthcare. They foresaw that much of the world's economy would move into online transactions away from government control. For them the key question is how to maximise one's individual autonomy from others, from community and government. They envisioned a zero-sum state of natural winners and losers, where the winners are free from regulation or domination by government, which they equate with organised crime. As government receded with the proliferation of mafias, sovereign individuals would soar above the chaos by constructing protective bubbles that would survive the collapse of nation-states.

The Sovereign Individual is a successor to the work of the novelist Ayn Rand who developed a fan club on the right for *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). In Rand's extreme portrayal of negative freedom, independent individuals, predominantly men, reminiscent of the "rugged individuals" beloved of US Americans are pitted against the soulless bureaucracy of a State which they (and she) conceived of as criminal, and against other obstacles to the realisation of their ruthless ambition to realize their self-determined vision of progress. Although Rand was a novelist, and by many accounts not a very good one, Bill McKibben argues that in the present age she ought to be regarded as the greatest philosopher of our time, if only for her influence on 'threatening to end the human game'. McKibben describes the Thatcher-Reagan years as effectively the "second age of Rand", when she developed a cultish following that proclaimed her core message, 'Government is bad, selfishness is good...solidarity is a trap'.⁵¹

⁵¹ McKibben, (2019, 90). He devotes a lot of space to discussing in chapters eleven and twelve Rand's appeal to Donald Trump, Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox News, that parrots Trump's views and Elon Musk, amongst many others in "Big Tech". However, despite Trump's calls to 'drill baby drill', McKibben argues that even before Trump first assumed office, the oil industry had already effectively closed down action to reverse global warming (ibid., 122-123).

Although some might understandably perceive flaws in their logic, a major problem for the rest of us subhumans is that the works by Rand, Davidson and Rees-Mogg have apparently become the ‘go-to’ place for bedtime reading for the ‘tech bros.’ of FAANG, leading them to pour billions of dollars into the construction of enclaves on Earth and the missions to Mars that these texts envisioned, investing also in technologies to slow their aging so as to bring them to the cusp of immortality. McKibben (2019) devotes several chapters to describe this form of madness that have come straight out of *Brave New World* as these ravings were also inspired by literal readings of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. McKibben describes the dystopian fantasy of the current Tech elite, some of whom he knows personally, they are trying to realise as fact, for whom the world is divided between them (the “naturally gifted” members of the tiny GenRich class), and the subhuman GenNaturals whom they will generously condescend to serve them as drones. The elite envisage that they can leverage AI to their advantage and will be able bio-engineer their germline through CRISPR technology so that within a few generations Genrich and GenNaturals will be so genetically distinct that they will be able to crossbreed. Although for McKibben as for me, this fantasy has been plucked straight out of a sci-fi novel, he disconcertingly references the above scenario to works by prominent academics from reputable universities.⁵²

Although for Timothy Snyder (2024), sovereignty is also the first form of freedom, his argument could not be more different to that of Rand, or from Davidson and Rees-Mogg. For Snyder to conceive of sovereignty as negative freedom is to miss something fundamental to the very construction of human subjectivity. The fallacy lies in the presumption that humans are isolated individuals and that sovereignty has to do with simply clearing away those others who are perceived as obstacles to the realisation of their imaginings. In his alternative account, it is only through the acknowledgement of others, that we come to see ourselves, to paraphrase Robert Burns, as others see us.⁵³

For Snyder, the belief that we are alone and so we are free is a mistake that ensures we are not. He contrasts two senses in which the body is understood, as the *leib*, or living human body and that of the body as *körper*, or object. *Leib* is the essential source of knowledge of our imperfect selves together with that of the world and of freedom, enabling us to see others as subjects and not as objects. Given that *Leib*, our living body, is the essential source of our knowledge about the world, understood in this way, negative freedom which takes others as either obstacles or means to one’s ends is a form of self-deception, that denies the *leib*, of our own body.⁵⁴ Freedom should thus be thought of in positive terms, as the correct way to perceive barriers is as impediments,

⁵² McKibben, (2019), chapter 15, *The Name of the Game*, from page 151.

⁵³ Incidentally, this concurs with the psychoanalytic conception of the subject, as it is by means of the formation of the ego-ideal by which the subject can reflect on the ego as if from a third-party perspective, that leads to the subject becoming fully human.

⁵⁴ Snyder, (2024., 21-25).

“not because they block us as objects, but because they hinder us from understanding one another and becoming subjects.”⁵⁵ We must see the bodies of others as subjects if we are to perceive ourselves as subjects and if we cannot do this, then we cannot be free.⁵⁶ The idea of negative freedom itself creates intellectual and moral barriers, by incorporating a flawed conception of the subject as lacking in self-awareness, empathy and self-knowledge and who, by treating others as foreign objects denies their own embodiment as a subject. This perception of the body as *körper*, or object, ultimately leads to horrific, well-rehearsed outcomes, ultimately opening the door to demeaning the other through abuse, rape, slavery and murder.⁵⁷ For Snyder, a narrow focus on negative freedom which has a version of market-logic as its locus, “leads us to think that we have solved our problems when we have privatized them, when in fact all we have achieved is separating ourselves from one another”.⁵⁸

Consumer Sovereignty and Creative Destruction

While the notion of negative freedom is inscribed in the notion of consumer sovereignty, your daily experience of relations with corporations may be similar to mine, of powerlessness, being treated like a child by an organisational parent who appears benevolent but is often patronising and sometimes forceful. Liberal theory presents a vision of the Consumer, which, as it represents the aggregate of consumption choices, can flex its power to humble and bring down even the mightiest corporation. Proponents cite examples of dinosaurs that failed to keep up with consumer expectations such as those who in the early twentieth century locked their money into the production of electric vehicles to General Motors. Neoliberals link capitalism to democracy by likening the dollar or euro in your pocket to the vote you use to elect your political representatives. According to this explanation the sovereign consumer can punish firms that fail to serve her needs by exiting, or transferring her patronage to a competitor. A tipping point is reached when a sufficient number of customers make the same decision and the firm is bankrupted. Proponents of this view argue that even the mightiest corporation is subject to the same logic.

A clear thread running through liberal arguments onward from the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* ties marketplace morality to the rational pursuit of self-interest, linking ‘enlightened’ self-interest to attention to the interests of those others upon whom the attainment of one’s own interests depend. There is a paradox, whereby the wealth and resources of the largest corporation can lead its bosses to believe that they have unassailable “power-over” others, including their customers. What they perhaps fail to recognize is that their “power-over” others depends ultimately on “power with”, comprising the collective effect of a myriad

⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁷ My interpretation!

⁵⁸ Ibid., 49. In an appendix he further distinguishes negative from positive freedom on 22 dimensions (ibid, 277). In my reading of some of these, positive freedom emanates from leib or the body and government can play a positive role in helping all to fully develop their potential; negative freedom on the other hand is principally concerned with the perception of others as barriers to one’s self-becoming, where the market is all and where government is perceived as an impediment that must be removed.

of individual purchasing decisions. Just as the propulsion system of a vessel requires a source of power if it is to operate, so the corporation needs the power conveyed to it by the purchasing decisions of its consumers if it is to survive, such that, no matter what its size, the self-interest of the firm rests on keen attention to the interests and needs of the consumer it serves, (which is a point we will revisit later). Otherwise, no matter what its size, even a corporation like General Motors, once the largest company in the USA, will fail. At bottom, this logic is driven by the provision of choice, for just as competition is argued to provide the spur for governments to be responsive to the needs of the electorate, so that between firms has been argued to play a similar role with respect to the corporation and its customers.

The rise and fall of General Motors, is a case in point. Incorporated in 1909 as the Buick Motor Company, General Motors, or GM as it is better known, expanded rapidly, incorporating twenty brands such as Cadillac, Oldsmobile, Pontiac and Chevrolet. By the early 1930s GM was the largest motor manufacturer in the United States and in 1967 it made its hundredth millionth car. While for a time GM seemed impregnable the corporation began to struggle from the 1970s, when it started facing serious competition from Japanese brands. The company became famous for marketing “gas guzzlers”, such as trucks and SUVs, for instance, in 1998 purchasing and aggressively marketing the Hummer brand.

By the turn of the Millennium a new management team was hired which five years later announced its plan to reduce gaps in the quality, productivity and fuel-economy of GM cars. In June 2008 the management announced plans to close four plants making gas-guzzling trucks and SUVs and to shift production to more fuel-efficient cars and crossovers, which were more “family-friendly” SUVs designed to fit on a car chassis. The workforce was cut from 386,000 to 243,000. GM had first entered the Chinese market in the 1920s with the Chevrolet brand, but it was not until 1998 that the first car manufactured in China was launched, since when sales rose rapidly. However global sales plummeted following the financial crash of 2007/8, provoking a liquidity crisis, leading GM to file for bankruptcy in 2009 with assets of \$82 billion and liabilities of \$173 billion. The US Government then stepped in to bail out the company out which was split into two entities, comprising “NewCo,” a new company with a clean balance sheet, taking on GM's best brands and operations; and what came to be called “Liquidation Motors” comprising the unprofitable rump with most of the liabilities. The new GM that rose from the ashes regained profitability but by 2022, GM was no longer the biggest seller in its home market.

Some argued that although GMs sheer size made it bureaucratic, inefficient and inflexible and so unable to adjust quickly to a changing market, the main problem was a lack of liquidity. Others argued that cash-flow was a secondary problem that stemmed from a prolonged failure to decide which market opportunities to exploit and which segments to divest from. GM was compared unfavourably with firms that were arguably more market focused such as General Electric, Wal-Mart, Sony, Toyota, Honda, and Microsoft; “All of these companies have track records of driving market focus toward opportunities where they can create both wide buyer choice and high cash flows”.

The case of General Motors is illustrative of some of the complexities involved in trying to turn a behemoth around to make it more responsive to consumer needs at a time of rapid change coupled with external shocks. It also illustrates the increasingly common phrase, “too big to fail”, which basically signals to citizens the impunity of shareholders and capitalists who benefit when wealth is made, who do not suffer the burden of losses which are borne by the public purse and pushed onto the shoulders of the ordinary taxpayer.

Economists, who focus purely on the supposed rationality and efficiency of the market, presume a simple dichotomy whereby the consumer is either loyal or withdraws their “vote” by exiting. Exit is an impersonal process whereby the mass of customers shift loyalty from one firm to another and balance is restored through the operation of the Invisible Hand of the market. For Albert Hirschman (2000) this presumption is naïve because the behaviour of firms in the real world does not conform to the ideal type of optimization presumed by liberal economists. In his view individual operators and the general economy do not perform as well as they might and firms are “permanently and randomly” open to decline (*ibid.*: 10). Moreover it is not unusual for a firm to lapse and begin to fail before beginning to respond once more to consumer needs. He argued that another factor, “voice” which belongs to the political sphere, plays a crucial role in explaining this process. Voice is the opposite of exit; it is messy “political action par excellence”. Unlike the either-or, loyalty-exit, voice is graduated from faint grumbles to violent protest, “it implies articulation of one’s critical opinions rather than one’s “secret” vote. (Hirschman, 2000:16).

Hirschman uses “voice” to critique arguments from neoliberals such as Milton Friedman and others for the extension of free-market principles into non-market contexts. He cites Friedman (1958), who contended that education provision would be improved if parents were given vouchers to buy educational services, an idea that has since been enthusiastically endorsed by neoliberal politicians. For Hirschman (1970), “exit” is a clumsy once and for all approach that disavows the messy reality of political “voice” in how change actually comes about through dialogue and dissent. Applied to politics “exit” is often regarded as desertion or treason, when one switches allegiance from one party to another. Hirschman (1980) refers to a paper from 1956⁵⁹ that made a similar point to Friedman’s to argue that municipal services could be delivered through markets as if recipients didn’t like the service, they had the choice to exit or leave for another municipality. Such arguments have since been pushed much further so that services once provided publicly are now delivered through a series of contractual arrangements (healthcare, education, water, refuse-collection and so on) between citizens and corporations. Hirschman (1980) argued that the narrow focus by economists on exit completely rules out the use of political voice. He cites confirmatory evidence for his hypothesis that those with plentiful resources and status will simply exit if they object to the level of service provision, although they can be prone to ‘exit fatigue’ whilst those low

⁵⁹ Tiebout, (1956) in Hirschman,(1980, 448).

in resources and status have little choice but to try to work politically to improve their lot.⁶⁰ Moreover, the effect of this had profound consequences, contributing to the deterioration of the cities in the USA.

The Approach taken in this book

Given my earlier mention of the numerous shortcomings of dimensional approaches to power as episodic, individualist and dyadic, thus missing out on the big picture, as well as being mechanistic and empiricist, the question arises as to why bother? Most obviously this is because these explanations have inspired a great deal of thought and research which as I see it is entirely passed over today especially by critical marketing scholars in favour of post-structuralist explanations. That is a shame, as while I have a good deal of respect for post-structural theories, surely there is something to be learned from these more prosaic approaches, if only to act as 'straw men' against which to compare more complex instances and critical explanations?

Additionally, although Steven Lukes' meticulous reasoning demands some effort, dimensional theories are comprehensible, and the idea of three faces of power provides a ready-made and accessible framework from which to understand this complex subject. It is in my view more productive to start with Dahl's rather crude definition of A/b power and then work outwards to discuss what it fails to capture than to begin with that of, 'a 'multiplied, accumulated power' ...power relations that stresses the mobility and plurality of relations of force – thus working against Marxist accounts – yet still registers the inequitable distribution of influence'⁶¹, although I do eventually get to discuss this in chapter nine.

Although mechanistic and positivistic, the focus on detail and on gathering facts provided by dimensional accounts offers a counterweight to work that can be over-theorised and backed by little evidence and is consequently not of much use to anyone. And while it is true that theories are underdetermined by facts, the dangers presented by misconstruing facts or just making them up because they support your pet theory are particularly apparent in public life today. While it is true that the facts can be marshalled to support different explanations, it can be forgotten that facts can also act to undermine a particular explanation. I discuss two cases in some detail, comprising the McLibel case and that of Child Labour in Bangladesh. While these are obviously dated, I have used them because they well-known and much has been written about them.

In the preface I mentioned that this sprang from the last three chapters of an undergraduate text. If you choose to read on, you will quickly realise its length and meandering character that can stray far from the precision I argue for which is a

⁶⁰ Orbell & Uno, (1972), in *American Political Science Review*.

⁶¹ Denegri-Knott & Tadjewski, (2017).

seemingly inevitable outcome of the foibles of my character. More than half is devoted to a discussion of context and as I wanted this to be accessible for the general reader, I have tried to make the discussion at least in part two, as straightforward as possible.

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Chapter Two: The Consuming Subject

Introduction

My initial idea was that this would be a short punchy chapter summarizing some of the main perspectives, a task which, as is plainly evident, has failed miserably. I apologize for the unevenness and scrappiness of what follows but must perforce leave things as they are for fear of making things even more complicated. The inspiration came from the observation that although 'the subject' is mentioned over and over again in texts, hardly anyone bothers to describe what their conception of the subject is, never mind to consider this in relation to power. Of course Foucault wrote a paper on The Subject and Power and I also remember, but can't recall where I read it, the comment by Jacques Alain-Miller that the subject does not refer to that part of us that goes swimming, or who plays athletics, but is rather the one who takes exams. Given it is obvious that psychoanalysts are not swimming coaches, that they would not be particularly concerned with their analysands' prowess in swimming should come as no surprise, although the meaning the analysand attributes to swimming might be of some interest to them. Subjectivity then is about the Cartesian cogito that is the subject of, and subject to, the particular language and cultural context we are born into. This can be rather perplexing, as, if the subject comprises the symbolic self, then on the face of it this ought to rule out consideration of the effects of power on the pre-discursive self, of the emotions and the body, which is after all that part of us that is able to go swimming.

How do theorists construct the subject? From the perspective of consumption homo economicus, the rational actor contrived by neoclassical economists seems a good place to start. At the very least, we know where we are with this fictional entity who is perfectly rational, has perfect access to information and so on. Homo economicus has another advantage in being a readily understandable and communicable concept that accommodates common everyday understandings of power. But then homo economicus is a fiction and alternative conceptions of the subject are available. What is troubling and which makes this topic interesting, is that setting homo economicus aside, there is no agreement between theorists as to the constitution of the subject, indeed, far from it! The behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman offers a more complex version by arguing that human decision-making involves two systems, where system one, which accounts for the majority of our decisions operates without conscious thought. Freudian psychoanalysts locate the subject in the ego which is partly unconscious and mediates between demands by the id for immediate gratification, and those of the superego, for restraint. Not content with this, Lacan, the 'French Freud' develops a negative ontology where the subject is located in the Symbolic at the intersection of the Imaginary and the Real. Desire is of equal importance for Lacan and Deleuze, except that for the former, desire is constituted by lack, whilst for the latter it is positive, never mind that the latter entirely dismisses the basis of psychoanalysis. Rene Girard also dismisses

psychoanalysis, placing mimesis at the centre of his account of the desiring subject. And then of course there are the post-structuralists.

From the above it is striking that on the one hand we have the mainstream anodyne, readily describable, scarcely credible homo economicus, and on the other hand a range of disparate, divergent theories, each with its own arcane nomenclature together with its hangers on, disciples and apostates. The contrast between the grey uniformity of the former and the fragmented, kaleidoscopic opposition could not be more stark. Given the variety of perspectives on offer one might be tempted to give up on the subject, or on the other hand dive in and embrace the difference. The aim of this short chapter which is to be illustrative, rather than comprehensive, is to offer a snapshot of some of these differing accounts of the subject, to illustrate how, depending on how subjectivity is theorised, one can come up with a quite different understanding of power. The somewhat tongue in cheek “cod latin” titles used below are, ‘homo economicus’; ‘homo psychologicus’; “homo psychoanalyticus”; ‘homo mimeticus’ and ‘homo deconstructivus’.

Will these theories be like pieces of a broken mirror that when reconstituted will provide a fuller picture? Or as seems equally if not more likely, will the result be piecemeal?

Homo Economicus

Adam Smith is often mentioned as the towering figure that stands behind the free market with his famous quote that, 'it is not from the benevolence of the butcher or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but their self-interest'. However, human sociality and culture, which are also important to Smith's explanation are entirely missing in the formulation of *homo economicus* developed by neoclassical economists. In the neoclassical understanding the isolated individual ideal actor in the marketplace is presumed to be motivated purely by self-interest and to act rationally to maximise his utility function by optimising his assortment of goods, using perfect information to judge alternative offerings from a variety of sellers against pre-specified preferences, calculating their respective contribution to the satisfaction provided, and choosing the option that provides the optimum satisfaction. This also assumes the existence of perfect competition between sellers. This is further described in chapter four.

Although originally conceived of as a model of ideal economic behaviour against which to compare real-life situations, the concept of *homo economicus* hardened such that it came to be assumed that the consumers actually do act rationally, know their preferences and maximise their satisfaction. Assumptions relating to *homo economicus* were incorporated into models that purported to show that a decentralized economy motivated by self-interest and guided by price signals can operate successfully if left free from outside regulation.⁶² It has thus been argued that this fiction came to be viewed by some as the *only* way to understand economic and organizational behaviour.

This idea of humanity that flattens the variety of life and experience to one dimension might be understandable at times of shortage and famine, when people are truly individualised and focused entirely on one thing, as they are forced to scabble about for crusts to feed themselves. However, even if we accept that there is a way of differentiating needs from wants, which several theorists object to, even if our basic physiological needs are met, it is hard to conceive of economic life as purely economic, involving isolated individuals who lack all forms of sociality who are indifferent as to whether they are dealing with a human being or a machine.

Writing over fifty years ago Amartya Sen (1977) described *homo economicus* as a rational fool and it seems that since then, he has been quite sick, or to put it another way, a lot of real people in advanced Western societies appear to be sick. Sen argues that this model of the economic agent guided by self-interest is not only absurdly simplified but false, describing how over the years efforts have been made to introduce more realism into the picture, for example by introducing a more complex utility function or social preferences that interest *homo economicus* in the interests of others.

Many years later Kahneman (2011) synthesised the findings of the joint research programme with Tversky, developing dual process theory to argue that the human mind comprises two systems; System 1, which consists of fast, effortless, heuristic processes

⁶² Arrow, K.J & F.H. Hahn (1971). *General competitive analysis*, San-Francisco: Holden-Day.

that operate non-consciously, which outstrips the cognitively expensive, slow, conscious, rationally deliberative processing engaged in by System 2. Kahneman (2011) argues that the dominance of System 1 processing leads to systematic biases that undermine rational evaluation and leave individuals exposed and vulnerable to manipulation. Although the research programmes that led to the development of the literature on heuristics and biases and Prospect Theory were conducted in the early 1970s, these ideas enjoyed a renaissance following publications by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), Ariely (2009) and Kahneman, (2011). Tversky and Kahneman (1974) had found that, when allotted a number chosen at random from a roulette wheel and then asked to say how many countries are members of the United Nations, subjects anchored on that number, using it as a base for their estimate. This was subsequently elaborated in the replication by Ariely et al. (2003) with ordinary consumer products, asking subjects to write down the last two digits of their social security number and then decide whether they would pay that amount in dollars for a product such as wine. The authors confirmed the earlier findings, describing the process as arbitrary coherence; arbitrary in that estimates were significantly related to the random number even although subjects clearly knew that the number had been generated by chance; coherent, because they valued the highly rated wine more than the lower-rated wine. They explained that anchoring facilitates the “imprinting” of valuation judgments for later retrieval.⁶³

Homo Civicus and Homo Politicus

This counterpart to homo economicus was developed by the American theorist Robert Dahl, as the basis for his justification for polyarchy. Given that chapter six deals more extensively with Dahl’s argument, some concepts are sketched here. Polyarchy, which was more widespread when Dahl wrote about it, now reflects the state of some western democracies today where two or more parties compete for the favour of voters during elections. As with his economic cousin, Dahl’s individual is spurred into action by self-interest. Departing from Aristotle, Dahl argued that homo civicus is not by nature a political animal, because most citizens are so caught up with day-to-day concerns that they are only aroused to participate in politics when government action or inaction impacts on their personal goals. Dahl argues that in the face of this general indifference the individual who take an abiding interest in such matters as an active homo politicus is thus the exception rather than the rule.

Dahl could hardly be accused of being a starry-eyed advocate of polyarchy, which he argued is second-best to the ideal system. He believed that social class plays a major role affecting participation in polyarchal systems such that the lower one’s social class, the less likely one is to participate in elections and the more authoritarian one’s predisposition. Being generally apathetic, lower socioeconomic groups tend to accept rules and procedures that they do not support. Krouse comments acerbically, “Thus, to put the matter bluntly, consensus is best preserved by holding mass political activity to a minimum”. Such comments seem apt nowadays when the wishes of those who once

⁶³ See also Simonson et al. (2004) and Yoon et al. (2013) for related studies.

dreamt of authority are quickly becoming realised and where mass political activity is leading to the terrorisation and silencing of mainstream politicians.⁶⁴

For Krouse (1982), polyarchy, 'is neither pure majority rule nor unified minority rule. It is an open, competitive, and pluralistic system of "minorities rule."⁶⁵ He also makes some telling criticisms of Dahl's early work, noting for example, that, given the authoritarian bent of much of the populace, 'we must somehow protect the polyarch from the demos'⁶⁶. From this one can perhaps understand why Dahl was untroubled by low turnouts in elections amongst the uneducated lower classes who are prone to be influenced by authoritarian sentiments. Dahl also argued in his early work that because most individuals are apathetic, attempts to increase political participation through education are unrealistic. He was criticised for justifying an elite theory of democracy, by effectively arguing that direct democracy should be placed in the hands of an oligarchy - the result being a 'thinly veiled apology for elite domination and mass apathy'.⁶⁷ That said, Dahl changed his views in later life to argue for direct democracy.

Krouse notes Dahl's difference from Aristotle in that he believed that homo civicus is not necessarily a political animal, although this is not so much down to nature as to socioeconomic circumstance. As Krouse sees it, polyarchy ensures that government is responsible for the policy preferences of its individuals and so the Aristotelian participation in the common life as a civilizing process of moral and rational education, "is simply read off the theoretical map".⁶⁸

Dahl's argument changed from the nineteen-sixties onwards due to his concern at increasing distantiation of the citizen from the twin giants comprising what he called the "corporate leviathan" and the "democratic leviathan". Given that he held equality between citizens as the most important consideration, he was especially concerned by the massification of interests in the 'corporate leviathan' and its huge influence on the public realm, arguing that business should be made accountable to those whose interests they interfere with. He considered two ways in which this might happen, rejecting polyarchy in favour of economic and political controls and through the introduction of workplace democracy.

It is not too difficult to apply Dahl's conception of the majority of subjects as dwelling largely in the bubble of their day-to-day concerns, to the majority of consumers as largely motivated by self-interest, spending little time or effort in thinking beyond their immediate situation and resenting the actions of "do-gooders" whose revelations about the damage their lifestyle is causing threatens their enjoyment. In their role as consumers individuals

⁶⁴ See for instance, Karni, A. & L. Broadwater, (2025). *Mad House: How Donald Trump, MAGA mean girls, a former used car salesman, a Florida NEPO baby, and a man with rats in his walls broke congress*, NY & London: Penguin, Randomhouse.

⁶⁵ Krouse, (1982: 443).

⁶⁶ Krouse, (1982: 448)

⁶⁷ Krouse, (1982: 444).

⁶⁸ Krouse, (1982: 449).

are prone to the influence of emotional appeals by activists to take action on behalf of oppressed workers who make the garments they wear, the animals they eat, species endangered by their way of life and damage to the wider environment. They are also prone to misinformation campaigns that encourage them to stay dormant and continue to enjoy.

Given the above there are interesting parallels between Robert Dahl and Kurt Lewin, who was also concerned about the state of democracy in his adopted country. Lewin is best known for his work on democratic leadership and similar to Dahl, he argued for more democratic participation in a number of contexts, including business. However, Lewin went beyond Dahl by recognising that democracy is not a form of engagement with others that comes naturally, but rather individuals must be schooled in its practice if it is to take root in institutions.

Homo Psychologicus

Given that some time ago the discipline of psychology began to model its theoretical development on the hard sciences, the result has been the production of hundreds of micro-theories that each provides a limited range of explanation. In the following I have drawn together a number of these theories which I have loosely stitched together in order to weave something of a narrative. However what kind of narrative can it be if each presents a different conception of the subject? Discussion takes off from a brief excursion to behavioural economics which offered a direct rejoinder to the conception of *homo economicus*, then moves briskly on to behaviourism where *homo economicus* might be presumed to be at root eminently governable. This leads to a discussion of the extent to which human nature is fixed, or plastic, by conforming to the demands of authority, or to the influence of their fellows, or even to ensuring the preservation of their own harmonious sense of self. Related questions concern the existence of an authoritarian personality and the psychology of conspiracy theory which is emerging as an important topic.

Behavioural Economics

It is now over seventy years since the first publication of the results of the ground-breaking experiments by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) into decision-making under uncertainty which led them to question some of the key assumptions underpinning *homo economicus*. From these considerations they developed Prospect Theory to argue that in real life, humans do not process information in a rational and comprehensive manner but instead resort to heuristics, or rules of thumb. They discovered that even experts do not understand the meaning of randomness and are poor at assessing probabilities; that we do not use logic but draw on stereotypes to judged probabilities; and that we do not process all relevant information when making a decision but restrict our search to what is ready at hand.

This introduced the idea opposed to *homo economicus*, that humans do not reason in the comprehensive manner assumed by rational choice theory and that even experts are poor statisticians who resort to heuristics, or broad rules of thumb when making decisions. Many years later Kahneman (2011) synthesised the findings of his prior research programme developing dual process theory to argue that the human mind comprises two systems; System 1, which consists of fast, effortless, heuristic processes that operate non-consciously, which outstrips the cognitively expensive, slow, conscious, rationally deliberative processing engaged in by System 2. He argued that the dominance of System 1 processing leads to systematic biases that undermine rational evaluation and leave individuals exposed and vulnerable to manipulation.

Since the turn of the millennium there has been an awakened interest in consumer choice. Research into choice in economic settings has found that we do not optimize our

preferences,⁶⁹ which we construct rather than form in advance⁷⁰ and which are initially malleable and arbitrary only becoming fixed after we have made an initial decision.⁷¹ The context of choice matters too, for instance in many situations, we are prone to choose the middle option.⁷² When choosing, amongst the various biases we are prone to, projection bias operates by overestimating what we think we need from our current situation, for instance, by ordering more food from the menu than we find we can subsequently manage to eat.⁷³

Such findings coupled with the knowledge that the processes involved operate non-consciously in less than the blink of an eye, have led to calls for a more realistic understanding based on real humans as opposed to *econs*,⁷⁴ or superhumans⁷⁵. Given that marketers are well versed in how to influence our preferences and choice processes in ways that can be harmful for the individual and for society at large⁷⁶, this led to calls for the State to use positive power, expressed as various forms of paternalism such as, “libertarian paternalism”,⁷⁷ “asymmetric paternalism”,⁷⁸ “light paternalism”,⁷⁹ or “means paternalism”⁸⁰. The common feature of those approaches is the postulate that non-rational individuals should be *helped* to satisfy their preferences. Sunstein (2014) for instance justifies means paternalism as follows,

More particularly, I have urged that accumulating evidence suggests, more concretely than ever before, that in identifiable cases, people’s mistaken choices can produce serious harm, even when there is no risk to others. The result is a series of behavioral market failures that provide a plausible basis for some kind of official remedy. Behaviorally informed responses need not, and generally should not, attempt to revisit people’s ends. They are focused on correcting mistakes that people make in choosing the means to satisfy their own ends. (Sunstein, 2014, 163-164).

⁶⁹ O’Donoghue & Rabin, (2003)

⁷⁰ Bettman, Luce and Payne, (1998).

⁷¹ Ariely et al. (2003).

⁷² See Vlaev, (2007) in relation to contextual effects and Rodway et al., (2012) in relation to the middle option.

⁷³ Lowenstein et al., (2003).

⁷⁴ Sunstein & Thaler, (2008).

⁷⁵ O’Donoghue & Rabin, (2003).

⁷⁶ While some of his original research has come under scrutiny much of Ariely (2009) provides useful summaries and examples to illustrate how marketers can take advantage of relativity or context framing (ch. 1), anchoring (ch. 2), the actual cost of “zero cost” offerings (ch. 3), our lack of self-control (ch. 5), why we overvalue what we own (ch. 6), or like to keep our options open (ch.7), why we get what we expect (ch. 8), and the general belief that expensive = good (ch. 9).

⁷⁷ Thaler & Sunstein, (2003).

⁷⁸ Camerer, Issacharoff, Loewenstein, O’Donoghue, & Rabin, (2003).

⁷⁹ Loewenstein and Haisley, (2007).

⁸⁰ Sunstein, (2014).

This literature, including the contributions of Kahneman and Thaler is discussed more extensively in chapter three.

Behaviourism

Michel Foucault argued that the Chicago School theorist Gary Becker radically changed the conception of homo economicus from being a partner in exchange, to the entrepreneur of himself, of which more later. Foucault also noted how the definition of rationality was loosened so as to include, “any conduct which is sensitive to modifications in the variables of the environment and which responds to this in a non-random way”.⁸¹ Foucault concludes that if the subject of economics is concerned with systematic responses to environmental stimuli, then this is nothing less than behaviourism. The study of human behaviour long precedes the development of behavioural psychology and is most closely associated with Watson’s classical conditioning and with operant conditioning developed by B.F. Skinner. In a callous experiment on a baby called “Little Albert” that would not be ethically permissible today, Watson⁸² demonstrated the efficacy of stimulating fear in the subject, a finding he subsequently promulgated while working for the J Walter Thompson Agency. Watson’s theory. His approach matched the assumptions of advertisers at the time by offering a “progressive vision of social control... that assumed the malleability of man”.⁸³ In line with his argument that only three emotions count, comprising fear, anger and love, Watson’s basic message to advertisers in relation to the consumer was, “tell him something that will tie him up with fear, something that will stir up a mild rage, that will call out an affectionate or love response”.⁸⁴ Based on studies of rats and rabbits, B.F. Skinner developed operant conditioning, to argue that behaviour can be controlled by positive or negative reinforcement and extinguished by punishment. This explanation places more emphasis on the manipulation of environmental cues and has had far-reaching consequences and can be observed across the retail landscape today.⁸⁵

Conformity to Authority?

A core tenet of social psychology is that what the individual thinks and does is largely dependent on others, which has been the subject of study over the years in famous Muzafer Sherif and Solomon Asch. A particular feature of human malleability drew the attention of the behavioural psychologist Stanley Milgram following the revelation of the

⁸¹ Foucault, (2008, Seminar of 28th March, 1979, 269).

⁸² See, Watson, Helen, (2014). Baby used in notorious fear experiment is lost no more. New Scientist, 1st October.

⁸³ Kreshel, (1990, 50).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁵ See for example Underhill, P. (2009). *Why we buy: the science of shopping*, Ny, London: Simon & Schuster.

horrors of the Second World War. The experiments conducted into the influence of authority under his leadership continue to shock anyone who believes they are incapable of wrongdoing or evil. While many have been drawn to the simple notion that authority figures can induce us to engage in the most heinous treatment of others, Milgram (1964) drew the lesson from these experiments that humans are social creatures who have a propensity to accept the definitions of, and limits to, action prescribed by those in authority, whom they regard as being legitimate. That is, although the subject performs the action, he or she allows authority to define the meaning of the action. The implications of this are chillingly obvious. To submit others to extreme violence can be perfectly 'normal' such that those in authority who wish to commission such deeds have no especial need to find those of a perverse character to do their bidding.

Adorno et al. (1950) were interested to understand the acceptance of Nazi ideology by the mass of the German population in the 1930s which they argued happened because authoritarian tendencies solidified into the rigid form of an authoritarian personality. In line with this argument Zmigrod (2025) argues, in accord with the current fashion for neuroscience, that there are neural correlates in the brain with rigid ideological thinking such that the amygdala is larger in individuals who tend towards more authoritarianism.

On the other hand followers of George Kelly developed a more differentiated argument. Kelly (1955), who was the originator of Personal Construct Theory, focused on the systems of thought we use to construe our environment. He noticed that while many people are relatively flexible in their thinking and will change their views in light of convincing arguments, others are more inflexible and at the extreme can be either rigid or loose. As clinicians his successors were interested to explore the extremes, finding that those prone to obsession construe the world in a monolithic manner that brooks no room for differentiation such that their key constructs were highly related, forming just one cluster where construct A is tied to B and to C and so on. This was the case in cases of paranoia where the system was monolithic and inflexible such that subjects retained this rigid model even when knowledge or even personal experience contradicted it, engaging in, "exaggerated dogmatism" (Lorenzini et al., (1989). At the opposite end of the spectrum the construct systems of those prone to psychosis were found to be extremely loose with little relation between one construct and another, leading to the individual experiencing difficulty in finding any form of grip or purchase on which to form an opinion. By comparison with the extremes, the construct systems of normal subjects consisted of several articulated clusters (Makhlouf-Norris et al., 1970). In relation to authoritarianism, the closed and rigid system of the obsessive can be expected to be resistant and indeed hostile to reasoned argument from others that threatens the status of just one of their constructs, as to change this threatens to bring down the brittle edifice of the self. For instance, someone I know personally I will call Jim tells me that he has heard that Ireland is 'overrun' with immigrants, who are indolent, sponging on the State, or engaging in criminal activity, or both, and so on. He simply doesn't want to know when I present my side of the story based on actually being in Ireland (he has never been), that immigrant labour is needed, that the 'indigenous' Kinahan family from North Dublin controls one of the biggest European criminal mafia gangs, and that the immigrants I have met are hard-working and law-abiding.

What of the influence of the peers-group? While Milgram focused on obedience to authority, in a classic experiment which has been replicated several times, Solomon Asch and his confederates discovered that a person will go to extraordinary lengths, to the extent that they dispute the evidence of their own eyes, by agreeing with the obviously mistaken judgements made by others.⁸⁶ Revisiting the Milgram studies, Reicher and Haslam (2011) provided a different explanation based on the importance of the inter-individual context. Their re-examination found that the exposure of individuals to the voices of others had an influence on the outcome of the experiment, such that there was total obedience if the subject only heard the voice of the experimenter, whereas, if there was the slightest protest from the learner, compliance dropped to 65%, and as the victim got closer, dropped further to 30%. While one might note that 30% in this context is still a worryingly high number, the Reicher and Haslam also noted the “powerful irony”, that while Milgram’s studies sought to show that people obey orders, an “unequivocal” finding from the experiments was that when requests were framed as orders they simply did not comply! This led Reicher and Haslam to surmise that something else was going on and to construct an alternative explanation based on social identity theory, which suggests that questions of obedience will depend on perceptions of a shared identity. From this they pointed to the need to enquire into the effects of context on social identities and the impact these identities have on moral obligations towards different parties and vice versa⁸⁷.

The findings of Reicher and Haslam resonate with Browning’s (1998), sobering account of the real-life decisions made by “ordinary men” when asked to murder hundreds of civilians. Browning describes how Major Trapp, the officer in command of Reserve Battalion 101 announced before the assembled company of five hundred men, that those who did not wish to participate in the Battalion’s first action to murder defenceless civilians would be excused from participation in if they stepped forward at parade. In contrast to the Milgram experiment, Trapp gave his men a choice which was taken up by just eleven of the five hundred.⁸⁸ Browning describes the context, where Trapp was seen as something of a humanitarian against the noticeable sadism practiced by other officers as, “he had not only offered a choice, he had set a tone”, stating, “We have the task to shoot Jews, but not to beat or torture them.”⁸⁹ Those later interrogated who took part in the killing said that they did so because they did not want to appear weak, or cowardly, or to lost face in front of their comrades and indeed asserted that they had no choice. The tiny minority on the other hand who took a stand were later treated by their former comrades as social pariahs.⁹⁰

Social identity is relevant to just one of the six factors in Cialdini’s (2001) model of social influence. Firstly he took authority from the Milgram study; secondly, observation can be

⁸⁶ Asch, (1951; 1955; 1956).

⁸⁷ Reicher & Haslam, (2011), 168.

⁸⁸ Browning, (1998), 71.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 87.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 72.

important, as being in a position to observe the behaviour of others, as in the situation of the Reserve Battalion, could conceivably have acted as a counter to Trapp's authority, if the number of men stepping forward had snowballed. Some of those who did step forward may have been motivated by a sense of ethical commitment, fuelled by their need act consistently with their beliefs. The principle of scarcity, which increases the value of an opportunity because it is rare, may perhaps have played a role for some. The extent to which Trapp was liked by his men is another factor that may have led them to support him. Finally, the principle of reciprocity may have led some to support his call if they owed him a favour.

Fear of Death

Where does the antipathy towards others of a different religion, cultural practices or skin colour emanate from? Against the claim that this is somehow natural is evidence that much of the time relations between groups can be pacific, productive and mutually beneficial. An interesting explanation is provided by Terror Management Theory⁹¹ which is a psychological science that escaped from psychoanalysis. Its point of departure was Ernest Becker (1973) who in *The Denial of Death*, argued that the development of religion and culture are means for humans to construct a sense of real or symbolic immortality in the face of our fundamental fear of confronting our mortality. The psychological security of achieving immortality through belief in an immortal soul, by having children, or perhaps through producing music or literature that will outlive us is matched by our need to be thought well of and to have a meaningful life of which we are the author. The theory argues that when we are consciously made aware of our death we take action, by trying to keep safe, for instance by wearing sun-screen on a hot day. More insidious effects are produced when fear of death is awakened unconsciously, for then we are drawn away from engagements with others, and towards our co-religionists and those with whom we share a common culture. Being unconsciously reminded of one's death thus means that we cling more tightly to our world-view and more rejecting of others.

Conspiracy Theory

Given its prevalence today and the significance of the above in perhaps explaining some of its facets, it is important briefly to introduce the literature on conspiracy theory. The definition of a conspiracy theory in the OED refers to, "a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event'. For example the proportion of the US population believing that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone to assassinate President Kennedy rose from 61% in 2013 to 65% in 2023, and disturbingly for the US government, it was itself named most

⁹¹ See for example, Pyszczynski, et al. (1999), Jeff Greenberg offers a readable summary in Greenberg, (2020). *This mortal coil*. Aeon.

often as a co-conspirator.⁹² Researchers found that 14% of Americans do not believe there is sufficient evidence for any kind of global warming, whilst of those who do, 54% disagree that human activity is the primary reason but did not ask them if there was any kind of conspiracy involved.⁹³ By comparison, the astonishing QAnon conspiracy theory, which continues to be subscribed to by around 20% of adults in the USA fulfils the criteria of being political in motivation and of involving the activities of an oppressive shadowy elite.⁹⁴

A number of studies have sought to understand the tendency for individuals to subscribe to conspiracy theories. While some argued that education has an influence⁹⁵ the meta-study by Bowes et al. (2023) found limited evidence that conspiratorial thinking is stronger in community samples than in college samples. So what is going on? The authors identified three meta-correlates of conspiratorial thinking which combine personal characteristics with motivations, comprising; the perception of threat and danger, reliance on intuition and antagonism. Perception of threat and danger is associated amongst other things, with powerlessness, perceived threat and paranoia; reliance on intuition involves closed thinking, receptivity to bullshit, and proneness to delusions relevant to psychoticism; finally antagonism and the need to feel superior, are related to collective narcissism, cynicism and disinhibition.

Disentangling situational from personality factors one might surmise that those most prone to conspiratorial thinking may have experienced a perceived loss of security and status resulting perhaps from jobs that have fled overseas or are under threat, jobs that once provided a sense of security, identity and self-worth to individuals, who live in an environment that is physically and socially degraded. Added to the reduction in status, for those in traditional blue-collar jobs such as mining to be told that they should “learn to

⁹² Swift, A. (2013), Majority in US continue to believe JFK killed in a conspiracy. *Gallup News*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx>, Brenan, M. (2023). Decades later, most Americans doubt lone gunman killed JFK. *Gallup News*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/514310/decades-later-americans-doubt-lone-gunman-killed-jfk.aspx>

⁹³ Pasquini, G.; A. Spencer, A. Tyson & G. Funk, (2023). Why some Americans do not see urgency on Climate Change. *Pew Research Center*, 9th Aug. <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/>

⁹⁴ See Holoyda, (2022). B.J. (2022). QAnon: A Modern Conspiracy Theory and the Assessment of Its Believers. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, AAPL.210053-21; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29158/JAAPL.210053-21> See also, Huff, I. (2022). QAnon beliefs have increased since 2021 as Americans are less likely to reject conspiracies, *PRRI*, 24th June. <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/qanon-beliefs-have-increased-since-2021-as-americans-are-less-likely-to-reject-conspiracies/>

⁹⁵ See van Prooijen, (2017).

code” might at the least be considered condescending.⁹⁶ Covid is likely another factor due partly to the unresolved question as to the origin of the virus, anxiety over vaccinations, fuelled by some highly placed in government, with lockdowns affording plenty of time for individuals to engage with conspiracy theories aired in social media. A third factors is the weaponisation of anxiety by Russian trolls and by activists on the far right. Self-appointed “alt-right” activists such as Richard Spencer declared themselves victims of a corrupt state that works in the interests of a shadowy elite, employing racist rhetoric to insist that the “white” majority of European Christian heritage are being replaced by Muslims and blacks and that democracy is outmoded. Added to this is “toxic masculinity” promoted by proponents of the “Manosphere” on social media which stokes feelings of inadequacy and resentment in young men and since legitimized by the Trump White House through the brief return of notorious Tate brothers who stood accused of rape and sex trafficking,⁹⁷ and astonishingly, inviting the Irish mixed martial arts fighter and rapist Conor McGregor to the White House on St. Patrick’s Day, when traditionally the Irish Taoiseach presents the President with shamrock.⁹⁸ Claims of “alternative facts” made early on in Trump’s first Presidency supplemented by serial lies told by him and members of his second administration coupled with a cycle of announcements, cancellations, re-announcements of policies designed to “flood the zone” have deliberately fuelled anxieties leading to the sense of being punch-drunk. Finally, this was all helped along by a programme of information warfare promoted by Russian interests and other malign actors.⁹⁹

In terms of personality, Bowes et al. (2023) argue from the position that individuals have fundamental needs for predictability, social acceptance and to build competence and that different outcomes can arise from the extent to which these are satisfied especially during childhood. From these stable personality traits develop that shape the way individuals pursue their goals in life (Dweck, 2017). Thus individuals who are reared in an unstable and unsafe home environment may subsequently become acutely attuned to signals of potential danger, which at the extreme can develop into paranoia. Such feelings may be reinforced by sharing experiences or circulating stories that reinforce the idea that other

⁹⁶ Joe Biden in 2019 reputedly told an audience of miners in Derry, New Hampshire; “Anybody who can go down 3,000 feet in a mine can sure as hell learn to program as well... Anybody who can throw coal into a furnace can learn how to program, for God’s sake!” His comment was reported to have met with silence from the audience. Kelly, A. (2019). Biden tells coal miners to “learn to code”, 31st Dec. *Changing America*. <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/education/476391-biden-tells-coal-miners-to-learn-to-code/> According to Newsweek he said, “Anybody who can go down 300 to 3,000 feet in a mine, sure in hell can learn to program as well, but we don't think of it that way,” Source. Crowley, James, (2019). Biden Suggests Coal Miners Learn to Code To Be Prepared for ‘Jobs of the Future’, *Newsweek*, 31st Dec. <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-new-hampshire-campaign-code-1479913>

⁹⁷ Blistein, J. (2025). Accused rapist, sex trafficker Andrew Tate allowed to leave Romania for US. *Rolling Stone*, 27th Feb.

⁹⁸ Sharkey, K. (2025). Woman wins civil rape case against Conor McGregor, *BBC*, 22nd November. Quinn, Q. & Duggan, K. (2025). Donald Trump, Conor McGregor praise each other’s work ethics during St Patrick’s Day meeting at the White House. *The Irish Times*, 17th March.

⁹⁹ Kanet, R.E. (2024). Moscow and the World: From Soviet Active Measures to Russian Information Warfare. *Applied Cybersecurity and Internet Governance*, 3(1), 34-57.

people are dangerous. Anxiety is cited as another factor that may influence a person to embrace conspiracy theories, as they provide a sense of certainty, although they are also shaky in that they are unproven, such that over time they can increase the discomfort they were trying to mitigate. Status is also important as it reflects the narcissistic concern to elevate the self and to denigrate others.

Balance theorists shared with psychoanalysts the importance of harmony in relation to our self-concept and our relationships with others. We perceive our own selves as centres of goodness and rightful thinking and like balance in our social relationships, seeking out others who affirm us by holding similar beliefs. We dislike discordance, especially threats to cherished beliefs that are central to our sense of self. We make attributions to preserve a coherent and consistent representation of ourselves, tending to ascribe our own mishaps and failures to the situation rather than to our own failings, while applying the opposite interpretation to the failings of others.

[Once they do engage with these – now they have acted – must bring their actions and beliefs together to preserve an harmonious conception of the self. Festinger – must be notes]

Homo Sociologicus

Sociology is a vast subject that spans the full range of behaviour from the analysis of society to the micro rules that structure everyday life. That the question of the subject is more complex and fraught in sociological discourse compared to sister disciplines of economics and psychology is because many sociologists are critical of the status quo. At one level this finds expression as a rejection of what is perceived to be the narrow instrumental rationality that has gripped sister disciplines of economics and psychology that have progressively re-modelled their subject to conform to the image of the hard sciences.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, that sociologists, to paraphrase Yeats, have been trained to 'cast a cold eye' on the social relations and formations they analyse should not raise many eyebrows given the critical analytical spectacles provided them by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.¹⁰¹ While all sociological endeavour is critical in seeking to analyse and question how society is organised and how it functions, a knowledge of the works of Marx and post-Marxist scholars is a pre-requisite for Critical sociologists such as Steven Lukes, who are concerned to understand questions pertaining to power and domination.

Marx

Marx's theorisation of the power of the capitalist class over the proletariat is clearly relevant to the study of power as a springboard for discussions of class conflict and ideology. However, Marx did not just provide an analysis but also a prescription in light of which it is scarcely surprising that from the 1990s to this day, Critical sociologists and social theorists have been seen as a thorn in the side of the political and economic establishment which has repaid the compliment by running down and even closing academic schools. Some of those who were evicted subsequently established critical outposts in disciplines such as management studies and the liberal arts which have themselves come under increasing scrutiny and threats of sanction.¹⁰²

For the Critical sociologist while a working knowledge of Marx and of the post-Marxists is a pre-requisite, it is also a minefield. For instance, Judith Williamson a well-respected academic, recalled her shock to discover the weaponisation of theory,

¹⁰⁰ See Krouse, (2021).

¹⁰¹ Luscombe, R. (2024). Ron deSantis condemned as sociology removed as core college class. *The Guardian*, 26th January.

¹⁰² With respect to reaction to what happened at CCCS, see Curtis, P.(2002). Cultural elite express opposition to Birmingham closure. *The Guardian*, 18th July. See also, *The Guardian* (2002). Full Text of Letter, 18th July. A similar purge was conducted of Critical Management Studies at the University of Leicester. See ULSB (2025). *A site about the purge of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy at the University of Leicester*. See also, amongst others, Halford, S. (2021). BSA President writes to Leicester VC on the proposed closure of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy. *Everyday Society*, 11th May.

as if understanding theories was an end in itself, and the more difficult this end, the more superior those who claim to have reached it. And the more people grasp one theory, the more urgent it becomes to manufacture a different model, fast, so that you are still ahead of the great race to be ahead – which so uncannily resembles competitive capitalism.¹⁰³

There is an element of scholasticism at work as authors selectively cite snippets from the voluminous works of the Great Man, whether these are drawn from the early period (which thanks to the vicissitudes of history were published in translation later than his late works), or written with or without Engels, leading in turn to disagreements that are passionate and can be overtly hostile. The main question that perplexes them is why the proletariat remain so quiescent, or to paraphrase Steven Lukes, how the willing consent of the masses to power is secured.

Marx's theorisation of the subject presented a conundrum for his successors, once stating that the subject is nothing more than an ensemble of social relations, while at other points he distinguished humans from other animals on the basis of our unique and enduring "species being". In relation to the former argument some refer to Marx's commentary on the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, written in 1845 that, "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations". In this reading human subjectivity has changed in relation to the prevailing social structure, from slavery to feudalism and capitalism. Struhl (2016), deploys this conception against the contention by Hobbes and Smith that humans are naturally self-interested, to argue that it would be pointless to try to institute a society based on equality and cooperation if human nature were invariably motivated by self-interest and power, as such a society would be undermined by human nature itself. He argues that one does not have to be a Marxist to show that social institutions change historically and that human behaviour has changed in historical epochs, in which case the idea of an invariable human 'nature' might be thought meaningless.¹⁰⁴

What then of Marx's arguments about a unique 'species being'? ¹⁰⁵ In Byron's (2016) view Marx believed that there is a specific human nature which can be out of kilter with the organisation of life in a particular era. Marx asserted that by comparison to the mechanical mindless activity of bees, human production requires pre-planning and conscious deliberation associated with abstract thought, as in the architect, who "raises

¹⁰³ Williamson, (1991), Preface. This is a necessary part of the academic game that Critical academics must engage in if they are to secure their employment and gain promotion. A more unsavoury element is added in the lack of collegiality of a minority who gloat at their own success and at the misfortune of their colleagues. There can be a degree of hypocrisy involved as at during strike action in pursuit of better working conditions and less casualisation, to my knowledge, at least one 'Critical' academic crossed a Union picket line to work.

¹⁰⁵ See for instance, Wallimann (1981). One might object that Marx is incorrect to view production as a uniquely human activity. Byron counters, that humans produce even when they are free from need (Byron, 2016, 381). Derrida (2008) offers a trenchant criticism of the erection of such boundaries between humans and those other species they call animals. In particular, he seeks to deconstruct the foundation of the Lacanian – and by implication Marxian – subject who is presumed to be unique amongst animals in having capacities for language, simulation and dissimulation.

the structure in his mind before he builds it in reality". In his view the ability for abstract consciousness provides grounds for self-realization through self-recognition based on what one freely produces and which, together with the approbation of others, enables one to fashion and reflect on one's life as a worthwhile object. It is worth noting that Marx's formulation of the subject here is virtually identical to that of Lacan, for whom one becomes a truly human subject only once one has passed over the threshold of the Symbolic. Byron argues that this enduring aspect of subjectivity is apparent in the creation of use value, as a "natural necessity" that is uniquely human in all forms of society, as an essential component of human nature but that this is negated by social relations in capitalism.¹⁰⁶ Moreover he contests the historicist argument that human essence comprises the totality of social relations, to argue that if so, there would be no basis for alienation, as there would be nothing to be alienated from. By losing our 'species being' we are alienated from other humans, which means that if we were again able to produce in this way, then we would regain harmony with our essential nature. To sum up, human nature is enduring and what differs is how this is expressed, whether under communism or capitalism where the alienated individual who has lost part of their uniquely human essence is reduced to an animal like function as a seeker of pleasure.¹⁰⁷

Mystification

Marx once argued the potential for humanity to reach a true state of consciousness such that experience would be adequate to its object such that the social relations of communism would consist of spontaneous human intersubjectivity involving 'concrete sensuous self-creation'.¹⁰⁸ This way of thinking seems to lie behind Jeff Murray's description of Anna from Mountain Home Arkansas whom he describes as a voracious consumer of fashion magazines and brands in her quest for a sophisticated persona.¹⁰⁹ Murray criticizes the media circulation of simulated brand identities as a source of false promises and describes Anna's fascination with these magazines as a superficial understanding of a simulated entity that is based purely on "free floating signifiers" that focus on how an individual looks or what they own.¹¹⁰ At root here is an unquestioned assumption from which it seems clear that Murray believes that one can distinguish an authentic true identity from one that is false. In the commodity culture we lose a vital element of our humanity, for instance by acting to stifle our creative endeavour or being consumed by dreams of wealth and status as in the "American Dream" .

The idea of a devalued and suborned human nature appears also in *The Culture Industry*, first published in 1944 by Horkheimer and Adorno (2004). They describe the rise of mass culture as an extension of the Ford assembly line into the cultural realm through the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 385.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 389.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, from Hirst, (1979), In Eagleton, (1996: 118).

¹⁰⁹ Murray, (2002, 436).

¹¹⁰ A point made well by Baudrillard in *Consumer Society*.

creation of popular culture by mass media. In an arresting example they describe the scene in a film that depicts a movie-star in the role of a lowly typist with a hidden talent, who is noticed by chance one day by a big producer, then suddenly she is a star! This narrative conveys the “rags to riches” element of what came later to be described as the “American Dream”, fuelling the desire of the millions of typists who watch the film. In such instances “ideology conceals itself in the calculation of probabilities. Not everyone will be so lucky” (Horkeimer & Adorno, 2004: 25).¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin who never made it to the USA was fascinated by powerful disorienting effect on visitors of the dazzling Chrystal Palace constructed for the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and the newly built Parisian arcades, as phantasmagoria, deceptive images purposefully designed to entrance the visitor and displacing them from recognizing their real interests. These are metonyms, standing for the entire edifice of capitalism which constructs such fantasy spaces to lure the consumer into immersion in this fantasy world and to displace attention from the realities of exploitation, expropriation and class struggle (Tiedemann, in Benjamin, 1999: 938).¹¹²

From the above, critics have long associated marketing ,and particularly advertising, as mystifying social, political and economic reality. Not too long ago contributors to a panel of critical marketing academics cited examples of the mystifying role of advertising, cited as examples the *Reasons To Believe* campaign which implied that by drinking Coke™ will magically enable the consumer to overcome and transcend realities of war, disease and suffering (Dholakia, 2016). Contributors to the session also discussed the torquing of language such that social inequality is re-branded as “opportunity” and overseas development spending which is always skewed to serve the interests of the donor as, “caring and compassionate”. Much of the time mystification lies in what is omitted, where the *mise-en-scene* obscures what the audience is *not* shown or told. For instance, the portrayal of nature in films almost overwhelmingly frames this as a resource to be exploited and not as the fragile home we share in common with other living creatures.¹¹³

Social Character

While the above instances capture something of the ways in which a person can be mystified, Marx’s account of alienation points to a more fundamental loss of the capacity for critical awareness as the key to human subjectivity. This constitutive lack by which the uniquely human essence is reduced to that of a seeker of pleasure seems well fitted to the characters described by Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, who joined Marx to

¹¹¹ The idea of the American Dream has changed radically over time and it is noteworthy that one hundred years ago it signified the dream of equality, justice and democracy, which is virtually the opposite of the individualistic concern with wealth and success that it is taken for today. The version of the dream peddled in the film only came about in the 1930s following James Truslow Adams (1931) lamentation about the growing materialism of American society (Churchwell, 2018).

¹¹² Benjamin’s ideas are developed by Brown (2003) who coined the concept of retromarketing. See also MacLaran & Brown, (2005) for a discussion of the phantasmagoric aspect of consumer malls in the late modern era.

¹¹³ McDonagh & Brereton, (2010). Thankfully this narrative has since been challenged, particularly since *Blue Planet II*.

Freud to argue that human subjectivity is profoundly changed in capitalist social relations. Fromm (1976, 60) applied Freud's (1914) ideas on narcissism to the anxiety-ridden 'marketing character', an individual who internalizes the commodity form by identifying himself as a brand to be displayed against competing brands in the marketplace. In *One Dimensional Man* Herbert Marcuse, (1964) argued that the consumer society stifles the critical role of the egodissent of the masses such that, 'a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization'. Against liberal claims of freedom in the marketplace, Marcuse argued that in the consumer society the concept of liberty has been reduced to pseudo 'freedom of choice' through consumption, where individuals identify themselves as consumers purely in relation to commodities. He distinguished true needs essential for survival from false needs created by the advertising industry which captivate individuals and maintain them in a state of dependency. For Marcuse, modern life is so bland and comfortable that the critical faculty of the ego has largely disappeared, resulting in the total domination of the drives by the superego which is driven by the demands of the industrial system. Stuart Ewen (1976) added meat to the bones of Marcuse's argument, producing a more digestible account of the development of advertising and marketing in the course of the first quarter of the twentieth century, describing how the "captains of industry" became "captains of consciousness, accentuating the roles played by the prominent behaviourist J.B. Watson, in developing the "fear appeal" and of Floyd Henry Allport, whose idea of the vacillating "social self" was used by advertisers as the basis for the construction of "anxiety appeals".

The Later Marx: The "Subject-less" Subject?

The French philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) took the *The German Ideology* written by Marx in 1845, as the point of an epistemological break with Marx's early humanistic explanation. Althusser argued that in this piece, rather than focusing on the alienation of the individual, Marx constructed a materialist argument that settles on conflict and contradiction within the economic structure of capitalism. Here Marx portrays ideas as weapons in a field of struggle and ideology as an illusion that naturalizes an unjust form of power. Marx uses the camera obscura as a metaphor to describe ideology as an inverted form of reality where liberal ideas such as legal equality, a fair wage and the national interest are counterposed to the reality for the worker of exploitation, domination and class struggle, such that exploitation appears as equality, domination as freedom and class conflict is either masked or denied (Eagleton, 1996: 8). This work is the source of oft-quoted snippets that, "the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force",¹¹⁴ and "(t)he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas".¹¹⁵ Consciousness-raising is judged insufficient to change the

¹¹⁴ See under, Marx & Engels, (1974 [1845-1846]): From Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook B. The Illusion of the Epoch.

¹¹⁵ Marx & Engels, (1845-46) in Eagleton, 1994, 24).

system and it is only by changing these material conditions that consciousness can be changed.

Whilst ideology as described above is specifically related to exploitation of the worker, consumers have been bombarded for years with messages that operate according to a similar inverted logic. For instance, menthol cigarettes, which are no less deadly than others, were marketed as cool and fresh through association with images of waterfalls and springtime, whilst the *Silk Cut* brand associated the lethal product with images of silky smoothness. Brands of deodorant are marketed as “natural” when they are clearly artificial and cover up one’s real natural scent.¹¹⁶

Marx (1971) further developed his ideas on ideology “Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy” published in 1859, in relation to the economic base and the superstructure. This conceives of society on the analogy of a building where the economic base, consisting of the forces and relations of production, supports the superstructure which consists of two floors, the first of which comprises the political and legal State, while the second houses ideological institutions such as churches and schools. This argument, which has since been labelled “crude”, or “vulgar” Marxism, is that the economic base ought to determine one’s interests and therefore one’s ideological position. In this account while one’s class position shapes one’s interests, given the power of capitalism, proletarians may misrecognize their real interests and identify with those of the ruling class.

That ideology is a function of the structure of reality, construes society as a set of places which produce different experiences. Thus, if one is a venture capitalist then one will see the world differently to an artisan. Here the subject position, “capitalist/artisan” is the point of truth by which ideology ought to be calibrated and read. That one’s material position influences one’s view of the world may seem obvious. For instance, commenting on the Grenfell Tower tragedy in London when many died because they were told to stay put by the fire brigade, Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, pronounced in a media interview that it would have been “common sense” for residents to ignore the advice of the fire brigade and so escape the fire.¹¹⁷ Critics pointed out that Rees-Mogg, who subsequently apologized, who lived in a house in Mayfair, possibly the wealthiest part of London, had simply no idea of the conditions of life in a poor multistorey building.

However, the idea that social class *determines* one’s ideological world-view has been widely criticized as crude or “vulgar” Marxism or sociology, whereby, “(a) system of places is presumed and then subjects are somehow parachuted into them’ (Hirst, 1996: 114). This line of thinking has been criticized because it pins ideology to a person’s class position. Nicos Poulantzas caricatured this crude perspective which treats bourgeois and proletarians as if they are cars, signalling their views in advance by carrying ideological number-plates on their backs as simplistic; for example, the dominant ideology in a society does not simply reflect the conditions of the ruling class but often contains

¹¹⁶ Small Objects of Desire: *The Deodorant* (BBC2 TV series 1990-1993).

¹¹⁷ The Guardian, 5th November 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/video/2019/nov/05/grenfell-fire-victims-lacked-common-sense-jacob-rees-mogg-suggests-video>

elements of the ways of life of other class fractions.¹¹⁸ From this it is argued that one cannot simply read a person's ideology from their economic position as the realm of culture is relatively autonomous from the base. A further perceived weakness of "vulgar" marxism is that it presumes workers are cultural dopes who are manipulated by wily capitalists to act against their own vital interests.

Marx later introduced the concept of fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867 (Marx, 1976). The relative looseness of this concept, which he borrowed from religion, has since been subjected to various interpretations. Marx reiterates the point he made in relation to ideology, that there is a structural dislocation between appearance and reality but employs a different argument to justify this. The ability of a ruling clique to manipulate reality does not feature and instead his argument is structural, based on the circuit of production, exchange and consumption. This ties in with his discussion of value and the difference between use value and exchange value. Once a commodity moves out of production and towards the market it is framed in relation to its price relative to other commodities and so our attention as consumers is directed towards this frame. The real value of the commodity, say a T-shirt, reflects the labour power it contains, but the focus on its market price displaces the consumer's attention. Consequently, "a definite social relation between men...assumes the fantastic form of a relationship between things".¹¹⁹ The duplicity built into the structure of capitalism is that the consumer misrecognizes the source of value by mistakenly believing that value is intrinsic to the commodity, thus ignoring the labour-power that actually created its value. The price of the T-shirt thus conceals the social relations involved in its production such as the wages paid to the workers and their conditions of employment including whether workers are indentured and locked into dangerous factories or are underage.

One aspect of fetishism is the myth that the market is like a great god that stands over humanity which is naturally equipped to engage in market relations. Marx had argued that the way in which liberals worship the market is similar to how primitive tribes worshipped their gods. Liberals and their neoliberal successors have sought to justify the market as a natural force that stands above and outside of the human world and that humans are equipped with "domain-specific modules" to engage in market relations (Cosmides & Tooby, 1989). Ignoring the fact that the market is a human construction, the naturalization of monetary exchange and its elevation to divine status leads to the perverse situation whereby, rather than the market serving the needs of humanity, the relation is reversed, resulting in the situation of "material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Eagleton, 1994: 27). Thus, the market, on which all of our fortunes rests appears to have a life of its own, whilst workers are estranged from the fruits of their production, the value of which rides on the market.

Structuralist Developments of Marx

¹¹⁸ Poulantzas, 1973 in Eagleton, (1994, 132).

¹¹⁹ Marx, (1976, 83).

The influence of Marx's turn to a more structural explanation is manifest in contributions from Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu. Roland Barthes developed a structural semiotic analysis which he applied to quotidian objects previously thought to be beyond linguistic analysis. In a popular weekly newspaper series subsequently published in book form, Barthes discussed the mythical status of wrestling, French wine, British tea, soap-powder and magazine covers amongst other topics, demonstrating that the apparently naturally given meaning was in actual fact highly conventional and supportive of the status quo in France. Pierre Bourdieu developed a structuralist conception to argue that social and cultural contexts comprise semi-autonomous fields for the accumulation of capital distinct from the economy which are objective and which specify social interaction. Thus in the educational field he describes the naturalization of middle-class values applied to the classroom context, such that middle-class children are presumed to be naturally gifted whilst their working-class counterparts are considered as naturally lacking in the requisite vocabulary, range of expression self-confidence and motivation.¹²⁰ In relation to the perception of art and the consumption of food, expressions of taste by the middle classes are similarly presumed as being naturally sensitive and refined. Misrecognition occurs in each context as subjects do not consciously 'cognise' or acknowledge the objective generative structure of the field in question, leaving the symbolic violence involved in naturalizing and individualising the effects of this structural activity to pass un-noticed.

By comparison to Barthes and Bourdieu, Althusser's (1971) explanation clings more closely to Marx, although he reformulated key elements of his theory of ideology, by rejecting claims that this involves mystification or false consciousness and instead that signifying practices have a material basis, and fundamentally, that ideology only exists by means of the constituting category of the subject who freely constructs his or her identity within it. He likens ideology to the pedestrian walking down the street when behind them a policeman calls out, "Hey you!" Ideology fulfils its role and the subject is constituted when the individual responds by turning round in recognition that it is they who are being summoned by the call, although Althusser also allows for the possibility that the individual may not hear the summons or ignored it, perhaps deliberately or because they believed that it was addressed to someone else.

Discussing the materiality of ideology Althusser quotes Pascal who "scandalously" reversed the taken for granted progression from ideas to behaviour, 'kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'.¹²¹ The subject makes an appearance here because under the influence of Jacques Lacan, Althusser argued that ideology only exists because of the constituting category of the "subject". The sting in the tail is that through interpellation we 'freely' construct ourselves by drawing upon the pre-existing ideologies

¹²⁰ A study of the grading of school essays showed stark differences in grades between children of civil servants, whose essays were rated as "brilliant", those of the petty-bourgeois as "pedestrian" or "solid"; finally working class children rated as "derivative" and "unoriginal" (Bourdieu, 1984, 43, in Fowler, 2011). Bourdieu explains that the teachers would have been horrified if they had been accused of deliberately classifying essays by the class origins of those who submitted them. James (2015) conducted some interesting research on this in the UK.

¹²¹ Althusser, (1971) in Eagleton, 1994, 105).

that recruit us as their authors.¹²² The social totality is a structure that forms us into subjects in such a way that we fail to recognize it at work, as it provides spaces within which we appear to freely identify.

Althusser (1971) argued that the dominant ideology of capitalism does not so much occur in the work context but is relayed through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the family, religion, communication media, politics and especially the education system. Some of the ISAs mentioned by Althusser, such as trades unions, law and politicians, seem a lot less relevant nowadays and additionally, given his interest in education, it is noteworthy that he had nothing to say about the role of advertising in “educating” the subject, which seems a rather odd omission, as even now, I can remember ads and jingles that must have embedded themselves into my unconscious during my formative years. In light of which it is fortuitous that, influenced by Althusser, Judith Williamson (1978) decided to produce a manual for those who wanted to understand how advertising operates as an ideological apparatus that interpellates or hails the subject to participate in an exchange of meaning. Williamson’s account is useful too by illustrating the rather difficult propositions expressed by Althusser that even although our positions are structurally determined, we are constituted and live our social relations *as if* we are subjects, *as if* we constituted ourselves.¹²³

Williamson takes up Althusser’s formulation of ideology as a form of misrecognition: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”¹²⁴ From the above, although we may fervently believe that we freely create our own identity, the twist is that while we are indeed active in searching for the wholeness we lack, we are interpellated or “hailed” by advertisers to “freely” take up the slots for us to identify with that they have created for us in advance, inserting ourselves into the circuit by completing the meaning that is dangled before us. To begin with every product of a given class is functionally similar to every other and so lacks meaning and individuality. For a product to gain a meaning requires that a stable system of meaning referring say to inventors, founders, nature, science or celebrity, is plundered for signifiers that can be associated with the product so as to differentiate them from rivals. The process is similar to totemism, where differences in natural objects such as animals (“bear” tribe vs. “lion” tribe) are used to mark differences between human groups, the difference being that objects such as *Coca Cola* and *Apple* are not natural.

Williamson draws on Lacan to argue that ideology invites imaginary identification.¹²⁵ Advertising is a signifying system within the Symbolic that represents one’s place in the Imaginary, offering the lure of unification with the ideal-ego. Such re-unification of the self by fusing with the ideal-ego is of course impossible once the bar or threshold of the Symbolic has been crossed and one becomes a subject. However, the lure dangled by the advertising image that offers the prospect of imaginary closure acts as a potent

¹²² See Hall (1985, 102).

¹²³ Hirst, (1979) in Eagleton, (1996, 121).

¹²⁴ Williamson, (1978, 40).

¹²⁵ Ibid., 63.

means to channel the desire of the subject. By dangling before us the image of an Other, but inviting us to become the Same, the advertisement thus disguises its symbolic nature by offering imaginary unity.¹²⁶ We live ‘as if’ we freely constitute ourselves choosing from amongst the plethora of commodity identities on offer, which have been designed for us in advance. There is nothing false or illusory about this as the ‘as if’ is the reality of our experience; ‘As subjects we live as we are subjects and as such ideology really does have a determinate effect’.

In this account advertising calls or interpellates the subject to participate in an exchange of meaning whereby they invest in an image in return for the promise of an (illusory) sense of wholeness. The subject is not deceived by someone else putting over false ideas but is rather active in ‘freely’ creating themselves in structures which have already been created for them. That said, Williamson argues the advertising system does involve false differences. One is the process by which artificial symbolic differences are attached to products that are functionally similar and naturalised such that for instance, “Coke = Togetherness” while “Pepsi = Energy”. Secondly, the process involves some people, advertisers, who create artificial differences between products which are then sold back to consumers who use them to differentiate themselves from others, while masking those people who *made* the products.¹²⁷ Thus advertising by referring solely to the realm of consumption obscures and avoids the real issues that relate to the context of work.

Althusser’s re-formulation of ideology was subjected to critique, particularly in the wake of the events in France in 1968, on grounds that it is overly formal and ignores ideological struggle.¹²⁸ Stuart Hall (1985) also developed a neutral understanding of ideologies as systems of representation people use to figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it and what they ought to do. Agreeing with Althusser’s argument against false-consciousness (and the “true” consciousness that is presumed as its opposite) Hall cautioned against so-called “common-sense”, arguing that to believe in one’s authenticity is the worst form of ideological trap as this effectively denies that one is, like everyone else, immersed in ideology of one form or another. Thus, those millions of individuals who take the narrative portrayed in *The Matrix* as gospel, believing that they have taken the “red pill” which they believe reveals the true state of reality, have not fallen, ‘into Nature but into naturalistic illusion’, tumbling down one rabbit-hole or another, and ending up the most deluded of all.

Hall argued that Althusser focused too much on ideology as a property of the State and as the cement that holds society together, rather than focusing on ideological struggle. He found Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony more compelling because it acknowledges the complexity of relations existing between private and public institutions and by raising questions as to how ideology works in civil society which is largely outside of the purview of the State. Thus, while it is all very well to assume an identity of interests in a dictatorship, the relations between the democratic nation state, the media and civil

¹²⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁷ Williamson, (1978, 47). Italics in original

¹²⁸ See for example, Ranciere,

society are more complex than those envisioned by the Ideological State Apparatuses. Given that the media is not instructed by the State, Hall wondered how it could be that so many journalists can spontaneously reproduce ideas contained within the same ideological categories, seeming “to be inscribed by an ideology that writes them”, as the element of ideology that most requires explanation. His argument that one should pay close to signifying practices and overlapping discursive chains which can contest one another but draw on a shared repertoire of concepts, which they disarticulate and rearticulate (104).

Hall differed from Althusser by arguing that ideology is not simply a matter of reproducing class relations but rather sets limits on the extent to which the dominant society can reproduce itself. The powerless have the possibility to re-signify the meaning of pejorative terms used to keep them in their place. As an example, he describes the re-signification of “black” by Jamaicans in the 1960s and 1970s, for centuries a signifier of dispossession and disparagement, as positive, articulated with “soul”, solidarity and struggle. Hall describes this resignification as no less than the constitution of a new black subject, “the concrete individuals had always been there, but as subjects-in-struggle for a new epoch they appeared for the first time”; by invading the heartland of the negative connotation the black movement has attempted to snatch the fire of the term itself (Hall, 1985. 112/113).

During his time at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) Hall was influential in developing the field of cultural studies which in the UK had been initiated by Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. The difference between culture and ideology is,

The dominant culture represents itself as *the* culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range. *Its* views of the world, unless challenged, will stand as the most natural, all-embracing, universal culture. Other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign—its *hegemony*. The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes the forms of a continuous struggle over the distribution of ‘cultural power’. We might want, here, to make a distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘ideology’. Dominant and subordinate classes will each have distinct cultures. But when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture experiences itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology.” (Clarke et al. 1979: 12)

The above conception of culture as variegated led members to conduct research into the sub-cultural context of consumption in relation to which Hebdige (1979, 1988) is particularly relevant for his argument of the influence of style as a key factor in differentiating between youth subcultures. Consumer researchers Schouten and McAlexander (1993) later introduced the concept of subculture into their field as a means to describe the shared commitment to the brand expressed by members of Harley Davidson Owners’ Groups (HOGs). While their overall approach was broadly similar to that adopted by the CCCS, Holt (1998) pointed out the key difference, that while Hebdige discussed how mods and rockers emerged from a common working-class culture, using a range of commodities and locations as symbolic markers of their respective identities,

the focus of Schouten & McAlexander was largely voluntarist and individualistic, downplaying collective influences such as ethnicity, gender or social-class.¹²⁹

There are similarities between the positions of Hall and Steven Lukes, for whom Gramsci is also a stated influence, whose arguments for a third dimension of power are discussed in chapter seven. Lukes aims for the middle ground between agency and structural determinism such that agents are constrained to operate within structurally determined limits but enjoy a certain amount of autonomy, not least because in a given situation they could have acted differently. While Lukes argues that the willing compliance of those who are dominated is gained because they are mystified, he distances himself from arguments based on false consciousness, which, “carries a weight of unwelcome baggage”, to argue that rather than relating this to hidden truths, mystification is better conceived of as *the power to mislead* (Lukes, 2021: 154).

Fetishism

Larrain (1995) pointed out that fetishism may not involve falsehood or manipulation because the moment of market exchange is no more or less real than the production and distribution which are ‘lost’ because they are not taken into account by the consumer. It is not that the market is any more “real” than these other moments, it is just that it is the particular moment of the circuit of production which is encountered daily and is therefore taken for granted. Here fetishism operates metonymically by substituting the market, which is one part of the circuit of production, for the whole circuit. Fetishism is in this explanation not so much *false* as an *inadequate* explanation of a process. Fetishism is discussed further in chapter three in relation to the literature in marketing and consumer research.

Value

Value is central to the theory outlined by Marx in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, where he expands on Adam Smith’s re-formulation of the concept. Yet until recently, this discussion was largely hidden, firstly because it was seen as wanting in light of the marginalist economics of our time and secondly, because it was overshadowed by discussions of ideology and fetishism. Marx’s labour theory of is now making a comeback as fundamental questions relating to value assume centre-stage today relating to the pervasive financialization of the economy and the growing certainty that much human labour will be replaced by machines.

Marx’s theory of value must first be placed in context. Taking a long view, there has been a movement away from value being attached to physical, tangible things towards the virtual and ephemeral. The sixteenth-century mercantilists argued that possession and control of the circulation of precious metals was most valuable. Two hundred years later the physiocrats argued to the contrary, that land is most valuable, as it provides the soil for agriculture and mining which together sustain and nourish human wellbeing. Adam

¹²⁹ The term sub-culture was also criticized for being too narrow as it envisages a subaltern group with a common identity (Kozinets, 2001.)

Smith represents a profound change in the concept of value by focusing on the value added by labour which transforms resources into commodities in production. In his view productive labour creates the surplus value that feeds, clothes and houses those working in the unproductive sectors of government, services and households. In this understanding, while workers' income and profit from enterprise are productive, the extraction of rent by landlords and of surpluses gained through monopoly practices and the actions of banks are not.

A difficulty with Smith's conception of value is that he provides no objective measure. Marx's major contribution lay in his differentiation of the actual labour expended in production from labour power, which is the capacity to work. Labour power requires that the worker is fed, clothed, educated and otherwise sustained to enable them to engage in a day's work. A worker may need to work four hours a day to restore his or her labour power. However, the dynamism of capitalism represented by its insatiable drive towards continuous growth, leads to the extraction of eight or more hours of work, creating huge amounts of surplus value over and above the reproduction of labour power. This surplus supports unproductive sectors such as services and banking or is otherwise pocketed by capitalists. Marx describes the constant flux and upheaval caused by capitalists' quest for new markets and increased productivity. This leads to mechanisation which, by displacing labour, has the effect of reducing profits.

From the mid-eighteenth century the ideas of Smith and Marx were displaced by the marginal revolution. The marginalists moved away from a theory of value towards just one concept, scarcity. Utilitarianism was developed by Jeremy Bentham and from this economists promoted the idea that the value of a commodity lies in its utility for the buyer. Productive labour was redefined along these lines to describe labour which produces subjective utility. In this new understanding services are considered productive, so long as they are sold and labour is paid a wage. Economists focused on scarcity, developing the concept of marginal utility, which to explore the effect of a small change in price on quantity demanded. Relating utility to scarcity helped explain the conundrum of why water, which is essential to life is cheap, whilst diamonds which are useless for survival, are expensive. The value of a commodity thus came to be related to its price. Mazzucato (2018) argues that difficulties arise when valuable activities are not priced, because they fail to show up in measures of value and for the opposite reason, when products and services are priced, but do not confer value. In relation to the former, government and households produce value that is not priced and indeed it is common for government to be described as a drain on resources. Rent extraction on the other hand describes the activities of unscrupulous traders who hoard grain in times of famine to boost its price, or middlemen who over-charge customers and suppliers for their services.

Financialization

Stuart Ewen (1976) writes of the powerful allure of credit for early consumers who were promised that they could realize their dreams right now, only to be subjected to the disciplinary power of constant indebtedness. Dholakia (2012) provides an overview of the growth of finance capital in the USA from the instalment plans of the early 1900s to the maxed-out credit cards today. Strange to say but true, until the 1970s, the financial

sector was not included in estimates of GDP. As illustrated in chapter five, it was considered unproductive as a distributor of funds rather than as a creator of value. Karl Marx located finance in the circulation sector as a catalyst that transforms money capital into production capital. In his scheme, because all value is created by productive labour, financiers do not create value but take a portion of the surplus value created by producers. Although marginal economists disagreed with Marx on just about everything else, they broadly shared the idea that financial services are unproductive. However, following extensive lobbying by the industry, deregulation in the early 1970s ensured that where they once counted for nothing, the activities of banks came to be included in national accounts, such that today finance, insurance and real-estate (FIRE) represent 20% of Gross Domestic Product in the USA. Mazzucato (2018) argues that the financialization of modern capitalism is dysfunctional. As a consequence of deregulation, trade in financial instruments is today greater than the trade in products. She argues that finance capitalists act as rent seekers, using their position as intermediaries to extract a significant share of revenue without playing an active role in production and job creation. Rent is extracted in the difference between the fees of asset managers and the actual risks they face, in the activities of private equity funds that load their acquisitions with debt, and through the proliferation of hedge funds and credit default swaps.

Innovation

Mazzucato's second argument is that innovation, which is so often praised for adding value actually extracts it. Innovation is mistakenly attributed to organizations or even to lone entrepreneurs, such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, when government and public institutions have assumed the real risk by funding basic research. For example Gilread who launched two related products, *Sovaldi* and *Harmoni* to treat hepatitis-C. Sovaldi was priced at \$84,000 for a three-month treatment; Harmoni at \$94,500. The basic research was publicly funded and private investors contributed \$300 million to the development of these drugs. In the first six months of 2015 combined sales were \$9.4 billion standing at \$45 billion within three years of launch.¹³⁰ Mazzucato argues that a similar story can be told about the activities of the big five technology companies, *Microsoft*, *Apple*, *Facebook*, *Amazon* and *Google*.

Mazzucato critiques Public Choice Theory developed by the Chicago School which views government should be kept small as it is inherently corrupt and prone to capture by vested interests. She argues that government was unfairly blamed for the 2007-8 financial crisis caused by high private debt and reckless behaviour by private sector financial institutions such as *Bear-Stearns*, *Lehman Brothers* and the *Royal Bank of Scotland*, which had to be bailed out by taxpayers, who then had austerity foisted on them. She argues that the austerity programme was itself a grave error, perpetrated by the ideology that government debt is uniformly bad, ignoring that government spending on infrastructure creates value by aiding the economy to produce more goods and services. Arguments from Public Choice Theory thus diminish the important role played by government in innovation in infrastructure, education and basic research in science.

¹³⁰ Mazzucato, (2019, 108-109).

The Machine¹³¹

Marx was fond of using the cardiovascular system as a metaphor, portraying the capitalist as a vampire and arguing the imperative for capital is to circulate. Consider that two firms are each capitalized at £100 million and each has a return of 10%, the difference being that one turns over its capital every six months, while the other turns it over once every year. The return of the latter would be 10% whilst that of the former would be 21%. If it turned over its capital four times, the return would be 46.4%. This highlights two issues. The first involves breaking down the barriers to increasing turnover by providing smoother access to raw materials, increasing efficiency of production and speed of delivery of the product to customers. The second issue relates to the fact that the advantage gained by the firm with the increased turnover will be short-lived, as others will quickly catch up. However, the increase in the efficiency of production will have a lasting effect by reducing the proportion of living labour that goes into each product. Marx argues that logically, if less labour time is needed to make a given amount of product, this is equivalent to producing more finished products in a given amount of time. Increases in efficiency thus reduce the proportion of living labour in the product. Marx argued that because profits are made solely by living labour, profits will consequently fall in the long-run. He clearly got this wrong, as capitalists responded to the threat of stagnation by engaging in market development, diversification and creating high value-added service sectors.

Colin Mason (2016) asks what might happen if a machine was invented that lasts forever? This once seemed outlandish, however, as Mason points out, software is precisely such a machine as it costs relatively little and does not degrade over time. Today's machines are infused with software. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that a machine that lasts forever adds an amount of labour value to the product that is close to zero, thus reducing the value of the product, which essentially consists of the costs of energy and raw materials. These may well be relatively significant; think here of the Cloud which relies on massive data centres comprising huge buildings housing rows of computers that consume vast amounts of energy. Overall, the value of the product will fall towards zero.

The plummeting value of technology has led FAAMG¹³² to respond through an admixture of, monopoly pricing, massive growth through mergers and acquisitions and mining of “data exhaust” comprising the ‘behavioural data’ made up of the billions of keystrokes and utterances of individuals and their interactive behaviours, which is analysed to optimise the algorithms that keep consumers consuming and sold to the highest bidder (Zuboff, 2019). A key question is what is to become of the millions of workers who will be displaced from jobs because of automation? One influential report suggests that 47% of

¹³¹ The source for this section is largely *Grundrisse*, Notebook V.

¹³² Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google.

all jobs are subject to automation, which will come in two waves.¹³³ The areas to be impacted include non-routine manual and cognitive tasks. The former will involve replacement of those working in transport and logistics and in the administrative support and labour involved in production. Regarding the latter, machine learning will replace a range of tasks that require equal application of impartial principles across all cases, ranging from the preparing legal documents and accounts to marking examination papers and diagnosing disease. Even tasks that involve subtle judgement such as offering financial advice are open to computerisation. If this is startling, nanotechnology presents humanity with unprecedented opportunities and challenges.

In the late 1950s Richard Feynman proposed the incredible prospect of an economy consisting entirely of machines the size of a dust particle that are constructed to operate at the nano-scale. A nanometer is one billionth of a metre- a human hair is 80,000 nanometers. One nanometer is the width of three atoms. So far it is estimated that two thousand nano products have been developed that are used in products such as waterproof clothing and molecular filters that remove the pollution from exhausts. The promise of nano-technology is that in fifty or so years replicators will have been developed that can make absolutely anything by combining atoms into molecules. The most sophisticated molecular robot was constructed in 2019 made up of 150 atoms, which works in the same way as a robot in an assembly line to produce new types of molecules depending on how it is programmed. It is envisaged that such machines will be powered by light and chemical fuels. Proponents argue that nano-factories will emit no waste and will allow humans to fabricate anything they want from air, water and soil. Given that the nano-world is characterised by abundance this raises fundamental questions about marginal economics which is founded on scarcity. Add to this developments in quantum computing which is developing at a pace previously thought unimaginable and developments in Artificial Intelligence which herald, depending on one's outlook, the realisation of previously unimaginable utopian and dystopian visions. Mason asks, if nothing is scarce, does anything have value? What happens to manufacturers? What will work consist of? How will incomes be made – will there even be a need for income and work? If not, how will humans define themselves in the absence of employment? What of the role of government in collecting and distributing tax revenues?

Discussion

It is noteworthy that since the 2008 financial crash and in the context of the fourth industrial revolution authors have turned more towards Marx's later structural theory which discusses the tendency of capitalism towards crisis and the effects of replacing labour with machines. Indeed Klaus Schwab, chair of the World Economic Forum (Schwab, 2016) declared that the transformation brought about by developments in

¹³³ Frey, C.B. & M. Osborne (2013). The future of employment; How susceptible are jobs to computerisation? Oxford University workshop on, 'Machines and Employment'. See also, Osborne, M. & C.B Frey (2018), Automation and the future of work. Oxford Martin Programme on Technology and Employment. <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/future-of-employment.pdf>. Accessed August 2019.

automation, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and the formation of cryptocurrencies which are growing apace will have unprecedented effects on the entire economic system in years to come. The change is not linear but exponential. In the “Founder’s Letter”, Sergey Brin (2017) President of Google’s parent company Alphabet described how The Pentium II computer that was used at the time Google began operations performed roughly 100 million floating point operations per second, while Tensor Processing Units used for neural networks and machine learning were then capable of producing 180 trillion operations per second.¹³⁴ And by now that figure has been superseded as a trip to Nvidia’s website should demonstrate. Given the massive concentration of power in the hands of Big Tech, this unprecedented acceleration in technology has led to a step-change, which its developers argue will save humanity from itself, whilst observers on the fringes are becoming increasingly worried and indeed alarmed of the prospect of its deployment by a fast rising global oligarchy, as a shield to protect their position and as a weapon. In the headlong mimetic scramble for advantage scarcely any thought has been given to the real-life effects of developing these technologies or to the moral context of their use. Some warn that Artificial Intelligence will accord unheard of power to would-be demagogues, revolutionaries and terrorists. When combined with drone technology this offers the very real possibility for every action by every individual on the planet to be monitored in real time. The truly frightening thing is that no-one, including those individuals in organizations at the forefront of developing these technologies has considered their implications.¹³⁵

Social Theorists of Late modernity and postmodernity

While Marx continues to inspire theorists from the Left, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens conceived of capitalism as one aspect of late modernity. Through vivid metaphors they express concerns about individualism, rootlessness, the crumbling of social institutions once thought eternal, of powerlessness and dislocation in the face of globalization, subjection to the increasingly abstract systems that social life depends on for its functioning and the pressing weight of responsibility laid on the shoulders of the individual, who is expected to be an entrepreneur of the self. Giddens argues that in the ‘runaway world’ of late modernity, the individual is uprooted and disembedded from the bulwarks of family, community and religion. For Bauman liquid modernity perfectly describes the plight of the postmodern individual who must stumble through quicksand. Community, once a solid term to signify a group sutured by thick bonds of kinship and tradition is now invoked as a description of ephemeral and threadbare forms of human connection such as the “brand communities” comprising Mac users and Saab drivers described by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). Despite the optimism of some who publish in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, neither Giddens nor Bauman is convinced that consumerism has, or will, fill the gap left by the dissolution of key institutions what

¹³⁴ Brin, Sergey (2017) Founder’s Letter. <https://abc.xyz/investor/founders-letters/2017/index.html>

¹³⁵ See for example, Kissinger, H.A.; C Mundie and E. Schmidt (2024). *Genesis: Artificial intelligence, hope and the human spirit*, John Murray Press

Althusser referred to as key “State Apparatuses” that once provided grounds for the interpellation of ideology.

Giddens highlights institutional trust in the abstract systems that westerners take for granted as their entitlement, of water that is safe to drink, a well-functioning sewage system, lighting and heating at the flick of a switch, a year-round plentiful supply of a variety of foods, readily available transport and communication technologies and a social security blanket. However, despite that all of these services remained intact during the massive disruption that occurred through the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and despite the successful invention of vaccines and of mass vaccination programmes it has become clear that a substantial proportion of the population are now distrustful of government and indeed of all institutions.

Beck argues that the modern individual is deeply implicated in the late modern risk society as the steward of their personal capital who is expected to reflexively anticipate and manage risks to their fitness, health and wealth. Modern science, industry and technology that drove increased life expectancy and rapid material progress throughout the twentieth century are increasingly recognized as posing existential threats to human existence, of global warming, nuclear war, the supplanting of human by artificial intelligence and the unknown threats posed by biological and nano technologies.

One must be careful not to generalise, to recognise that something more complex is going on. For instance should we regard vociferous campaigns against lockdown restrictions and vaccine mandates at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the actions of the incoming second Trump administration to appoint known sceptics on climate and health, and to put into question billions of dollars in funding for scientific research, as evidence of an erosion in institutional trust? Behavioural and polling data from the USA and the UK suggest that whilst trust in scientists declined from 2019 to 2024, the vast majority not only complied with lockdown vaccination guidelines but endorsed them.¹³⁶ The dip in trust in scientists from 86% pre-pandemic to 76% in 2024 was largely explained by the increase in the sizeable minority who evince no trust in science, which rose from 13% to 23%.¹³⁷ However scientists themselves are all too aware of the real present risks presented by current research programmes into technologies that are imperfectly understood and which potentially pose a threat to humanity.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ In the UK, pollsters noted that while posts on Twitter seemed to indicate that Britain was in ‘open rebellion’, population polling found that 93% of the population supported the initial lockdown in March 2020 and 83% endorsed later measures imposed in September of that year. One of the main criticisms of the later imposition was that it didn’t go far enough. Source: Curtis, C. (2020). ‘Only the “loud minority” oppose lockdown restrictions, *YouGov*. 25th September.

¹³⁷ Tyson, A. & B. Kennedy, (2024). Public trust in science and views on their role in policy making. *Pew Research Center*, 14th November.

¹³⁸ Many are concerned about the Trump administration’s removal of State oversight of Artificial Intelligence programmes. However, as Adamala, K.P. et al. (2024) point out, there are risks on a number of fronts. They describe how RNA and DNA are made up of ‘right-handed’ nucleotides and proteins from ‘left-handed’ amino acids. Their paper reports that, ‘driven by curiosity some researchers had begun work towards creating reversible lifeforms composed entirely of mirror-image biological molecules’, a development they argue constitutes ‘unprecedented and largely overlooked risks’.

Beck argues along similar lines to Norbert Elias, that individualization is a profoundly social structure that has undermined the traditional basis for social coexistence' "it means the paradox of an 'individualizing structure' as a non-linear, open-ended, highly ambivalent, ongoing process. It relates to a decline of narratives of given sociability" (Beck & Beck, 2001: xxii). The individual today lacks stable anchor-points for identity that were once provided by religion, nationality, gender and social class.

Given increased specialization of knowledge the individual today is often ignorant, even of the origin and nutritional value of the food they eat, never mind of the thicket of regulations that surround its production and sale put in place to protect them. However, in a society that prides itself on freedom of choice these same individuals are also presumed to have the relevant knowledge to judge what is and what is not good for their general wellbeing. In between the food production system and the consumer are the experts who make a good living by constantly (and seemingly fruitlessly) advising the consumer to avoid entire aisles in supermarkets devoted to chocolates, crisps and alcohol and 'UPFs'¹³⁹, the 'wellness industry' that feeds off consumer guilt and shame, the pharma companies and medics who profit greatly from the invention of new weight-loss drugs, and last but not least, the media, that advertises all the bad stuff ('you've only got one life') whilst simultaneously preaching about the "problem' of obesity laying out 'solutions' in its editorials. In the UK, levels of trust in Government regulators are reported to be relatively high despite that many witnessed in living memory outbreaks of Food and Mouth disease and BSE, a novel disease in cattle first detected in 1986, which later transferred to humans in the form of a novel variant of CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease). This brought a massive scandal of dangerous food industry practices to public attention.¹⁴⁰ The basis of institutional trust in things as basic as a guaranteed food supply could be undermined very quickly. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted major vulnerabilities in the ability of the UK food chain which is largely based on Just-In-Time principles to cope with future shocks.¹⁴¹

Given increasing specialisation, Giddens, Bauman and Beck have recognised the increasing role of experts in mediating knowledge and the problems this creates for overall levels of trust, which have markedly declined in recent years. Giddens discusses the institutionally reflexive nature of science which is governed by the principle of doubt such that no matter how cherished and well-established a scientific finding may be, it is always open to dispute and revision in light of new findings. A problem arises when issues that ought to be resolved within the scientific community are widely publicised by

¹³⁹ Spector, T. (2024). *Food for life*, NY: Vintage, Van Tulleken, C. (2023). *Ultra-processed people: why do we all eat stuff that isn't food and why can't we stop?* Cornerstone Press.

¹⁴⁰ Government Chemist, (2025). *Food security report 2024*. UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 14th January. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-food-security-report-2024-published> Cattle from Britain began to suffer from BSE in 1986 and by the late 1990s medics became aware of an increasing number of infections and deaths in the UK population. See Will, R.G. et al. (1996). A new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in the UK. *The Lancet*, 347(9006), 921 - 925

¹⁴¹ See for instance, Laing, T. (2025). Briefing note. Civil resilience and UK preparedness for food system shocks. *UK Research and Innovation*. <https://www.agrifood4netzero.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Tim-Lang-Civil-Resilience-Briefing.pdf>

the mass media, as occurred in the case of the erroneous claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism. This is compounded by the everyday misunderstanding that science is exact, as in the ‘Follow the Science’ rhetoric unwisely circulated by the Johnson Government in the UK during the Covid epidemic.¹⁴² The reflexivity of science is thus existentially troubling to ordinary individuals who must live in a world where whatever passes for ‘truth’ must always be placed in doubt.

The problem with relying on experts is that they often get it wrong, which far from increasing confidence, can lead to cynicism. This can be for innocent reasons, given that even experts are subject to the same heuristic processes and biases that the rest of us mortals are subject to.¹⁴³ Additionally, before the rapid growth in social media, experts promoting a scare story or perhaps touting the prospect of a new drug as a ploy to gain ‘impact’ or funding, or disagreements between experts on a matter of substance would regularly feature on mass media outlets. Add to this the toxic role of PR – from lead to tobacco to denial of global warming corporations have infiltrated to the highest levels of science and the academy to recruit to their aim.

Norms

A related line of research is into the extent to which norms regulate behaviour in terms of what “ought” to be done in a particular context. Norms are not simply rules, which are merely ideals, if they lack enforcement (Horne, 2001: 4). As is obvious to anyone who plays the “suitcase game”, “innocently” shuffling their suitcase ahead of them in a queue to avoid losing their place to a rival, people pay very close attention to what others are doing. Consumer researchers have explored whether queues can be thought of as social systems and what happens when normative expectations are violated, as when individuals butt into a queue. Schau and Gilly (1998) employed an ethnomethodological approach to explore the normative behaviours and sanctions at fast food drive-thrus by deliberately contravening expectations, for instance, by delaying their transit through the section and going through on roller-skates.

The focus on norms and queues invites consideration of the extent to which new norms have emerged in recent years to train consumers to pack their own supermarket shopping and to check in and transport their own bags to the conveyor belt at the airport. Sometimes these are sold on the basis of self-interested convenience, yet it is legitimately asked how convenient is it when one has to do the labour for oneself? A well-known trope that goes back many years is that as a rule people in Britain are masters at self-organising queues, which they will form at the drop of a hat, whether at the airport, supermarket or bus-stop.

While queuing is what can be called a “thick”, or general-purpose rule that can be applied to a host of situations. Daston (2022), argues that thick rules are being progressively replaced by a host of thin rules that operate in specific circumstances. Not

¹⁴² See for instance, MacAulay et al. (2023).

¹⁴³ See Dror et al., (2011).

only are we expected to queue at the supermarket checkout, we are also expected to bring our own bag, place it correctly, scan the items ourselves prior to placing them in the bag before paying and so on – reputedly because it is more convenient to do so – which begs the question as to why engaging in all this labour actually is convenient? Nowadays we are expected not only to book our flights, print our own boarding cards, check in our luggage, ensure it is the correct weight, print the luggage slip and transfer it to the carousel, and later queue like cattle in the rain under the watchful eye of some tyrant employed by the budget airline, and all for our supposed convenience. The same series of “thin” rules applies to other modes of consumption such as buying petrol etc. In this day and age one might expect that airport security staff would follow rigidly specified rules, Kirschenbaum et al (2012) observed that personnel developed a number of informal processes over and above the formal rules that enabled them to cope with the exigencies presented by real-time contextual factors.

Rasmusen and Posner (2000), provide an interesting “Chicago-style” discussion of the extent to which government ought to engage with norms, which they describe as providing , “private, decentralized, and competitive alternative to governmental control of social behaviour”¹⁴⁴. While noting that norms operate more effectively against theft than does legal sanction, they argue that the law is necessary, given that many people are impervious to feelings of guilt or shame. In discussing government responses to bad norms they mention ‘dueling’ as an example, (although they admit this is a bad one as no-one in the USA approves of it). They suggest that government could step in to diminish the efficacy of dueling by diminishing the benefits of compliance and by creating effective legal remedies for deliberate injuries and thus reducing the benefit of a revenge norm motivated by personal honour. While some might argue that the government should keep out of the way ‘and allow the private regime of norm regulation to go ahead’, the authors conclude that its most appropriate role is to supplement and regulate norm sanctions.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Rasmusen & Posner, (2000:382).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 382

Homo psychoanalyticus

The psychoanalytic conception of the subject is complex for the theorist of power as it questions the extent to which the individual is master of their own house, positing that the mental operations of homo economicus, the supposedly rational self, are largely unconscious and caught between the conflicting demands of society and biological drives. Psychoanalysis has achieved at best a peripheral status in consumer research, enjoying limited attention in the 1940s and 1950s which waned in the 1960s in favour of a cognitive approach, followed by a decades-long interregnum, then something of revival of interest after the Millennium in the wake of developments in behavioural economics, since when nothing much has happened.¹⁴⁶ The basic reasons why this is the case were more or less summed up seventy years ago,

While unconscious desires can be important, they are almost impossible to recover empirically outside of months of psychoanalysis, and when uncovered they can be ugly and not lend themselves to effective selling appeals.”(Engel, Kollat & Blackwell, 1968: 29).

Sigmund Freud was well aware of such criticisms, writing just before his death in relation to his ‘discovery’ that, “I had to pay heavily for this bit of good luck. People did not believe my facts and thought my theories unsavoury”.¹⁴⁷ Freud’s admittedly speculative movement away from neuroanatomy to found psychoanalysis involved his blending of insights from ancient myth with findings from contemporary science, moderated by clinical experiences developed over a lifetime, as a continual work of progress. His experience of dealing with analysands returning from the First World War led him to refocus his explanation away from an initial focus on the self-preservative and sexual drives constituting Eros, to consider Thanatos, the death drive. Further complexity was then added when acolytes of Freud such as Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Erich Fromm, Erik Erikson, Herbert Marcuse, Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixious and Judith Butler to name a few, not content with the veracity of the master’s “facts”, had the temerity to devise their own concepts and explanations, some even forming their own schools.

In relation to power, Freud’s greatest contribution was to enable one to look under the bonnet of fictions such as homo economicus, the supposedly rational self, to reveal a glimmer of the complex nature of human subjectivity. While his tripartite division of the psyche into the id, ego and superego is so well-known that it has become a cliché, it provides a template to explore complex relations between emotional drives, identity formation, symbolic functioning, and societal constraint. His observation that most of these operations are unconscious adds a challenge to the analyst, while affording opportunities to marketers. Freud’s understanding of what today is called “neuro-divergence” was expressed through his observation that one should not assume that all human psychology is stamped from the same mould but that different characters form as

¹⁴⁶ There have been occasional articles, for instance a rare invited article in the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Dean McCannell (2002) who developed a psychoanalytic explanation of tourism and also the special edition of *Marketing Theory* edited by Cluley and Desmond (2015).

¹⁴⁷ Freud note to BBC in advance of broadcast, December 7th, 1938, p. 1. Sigmund Freud: Conflict & Culture From the Individual to Society, *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/freud/freud03a.html>

a consequence of early childhood experiences.¹⁴⁸ Finally, Freud posited that identification is the primary emotional tie that unites the individual to others and to the group.

A conflicted subject.

In Freud's hydraulic model, human physical and psychical growth develop through the constant exchange of energy. The hydraulic analogy he took from von Helmholtz is appropriate to describe this process as the individual is conceived of as growing and developing physically and psychically through the constant exchange of energy flows. The name Freud gave to this energetic principle of the life force is Eros. The id serves as a storehouse or cauldron of energy that is invested into objects in the world by the ego in the hope that this will be returned with interest. For example, hunger arising in the body arouses energy which seeks sustenance which is replaced by the food that is received, producing an added supplement. Freud focused on the difficulty that the society of his day demanded the repression of sexual and violent manifestations of erotic desire, leading to the internalization of conflict which manifested as psychic distress. In his later years he introduced what he admitted was the speculative hypothesis of Thanatos, the death instinct. While in his early work Freud had linked human cruelty and aggressivity to the self-preservative drives of the ego these were now attributed to Thanatos.¹⁴⁹

Unconscious Processes

It is noteworthy that consumer research has never taken Freud's theory of the unconscious seriously.¹⁵⁰ Freud posited that unconscious processes operate dynamically by repressing a troubling memory through condensation, or combining two ideas into one, through displacement onto an innocuous image, or through conversion into a physical symptom. Consumer researchers were instead at one time captivated by the use of subliminal stimuli in advertising, an interest provoked by a passing remark made by Vance Packard in one paragraph of *The Hidden Persuaders*, (despite that most of Packard's argument was about the employment of supraliminal stimuli¹⁵¹). Ernest Dichter, the principal advocate of psychoanalysis in the 1950s, accentuated the influence of supraliminal cues on judgement, such as the shape and feel of a bar of soap, the colour of coffee, the font in which a message is written, or the role of clothing as a defence

¹⁴⁸ However much is owed to Bowlby who changed the basis of Freud's explanation from instinctual emotional drives to the attachment relation between mother and child.

¹⁴⁹ See Freud (1930) *Civilization and its discontents*.

¹⁵⁰ See for instance, Williams & Poehlman, (2017).

¹⁵¹ By comparison to supraliminal stimuli that we see all around us but may not notice, sub-liminal stimuli pass below the limen of consciousness. A meta-analysis by Trappey (1996) cites more than ten papers on subliminal advertising published in marketing journals.

against contamination.¹⁵² Subsequent research by social psychologists proved the operation of mental processes such as the ‘halo’ effect, where individuals perceived as “warm” are considered competent, while those who are physically attractive are thought to be kind and trustworthy.¹⁵³ However, such was the antipathy by consumer researchers to any idea of the unconscious, never mind the Freudian unconscious, that it was not until after the turn of the Millenium that the *Journal of Consumer Research* saw fit to publish an article that once more made the case that much, if not most social judgement and intention occurs without conscious awareness.¹⁵⁴ Since then JCR has published research on the effects of supra-liminal cues on behaviour, for instance to assess the effect of the size of a waiter on the food one orders of dieters and non-dieters,¹⁵⁵ or the extent to which individuals identify with attributes of brand personalities.¹⁵⁶

The implication for the understanding of power from non-conscious decision making is that virtually every minute of every day the individual is influenced by supra-liminal stimuli which they see but do not notice. The operation of the Freudian or Lacanian unconscious is darker and more convoluted than this, dealing with the formation of desires. Just one paper, by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) came close to accepting this. The authors argued the need to go beyond the cognitive focus on manifest content to explore consumption fantasies involving, “material that often masks embarrassing or socially sensitive perceptions” that provokes anxiety or is repressed. However, they distanced their orientation from the Freudian perspective by arguing that this material is preconscious not unconscious¹⁵⁷. Questions pertaining to Freud’s concept of the unconscious are perhaps better suited to exploration within the purview of the arts which allows more leeway to a range of explanation.

Sex and Gender

Like Freud Ernest Dichter was also concerned by questions of sex and gender, but in the much narrower sense of their use to marketing. In relation to the former he argued that, ‘the trouble with advertising is that it hasn’t enough sex and the little bit that is has is the wrong kind’.¹⁵⁸ He disparaged the taboo-ridden, superficial, stereotyped portrayals of sexuality in American advertising, arguing for presentations that were less clichéd and more genuine. Dichter also contended that the marketing of gender roles should be more clearly differentiated. He was closely involved in studying reception of the launch of the *Barbie* doll by Mattel, arguing that her key appeal lay in her approximation to the

¹⁵² See for example Dichter, (1960, 105) with respect to textiles.

¹⁵³ Nisbett & Wilson, (1977).

¹⁵⁴ See Bargh, (2002).

¹⁵⁵ McFerran et al., (2010).

¹⁵⁶ In the study by Fitzsimons et al. (2008) reported that individuals primed with Apple logos behaved more creatively than those primed with an IBM logo.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵⁸ References here are from Parkin, (2010, pp. 140, 141).

American Dream, such that she possessed unlimited freedom to achieve all of her dreams.¹⁵⁹

Identification

For Freud the self is constituted by identifications which are the most primitive imaginary emotional connections one can make and so are resistant to change by rational argument. Freud controversially offered the myth of the totem meal in his *Group Psychology*¹⁶⁰, to argue that identification springs from the desire to assume the power of the other by eating them. However, identification can be ambivalent between love of and hatred for the other. For instance, when the child resolves the Oedipus Complex by identifying with his father, this may be to recapture a lost love object or to defend himself against the father's aggression.¹⁶¹

Freud had earlier associated melancholia as a case of identification whereby the subject cannot let go of the object and so internalizes it. Identification thus occurs in relation to the loss of our love-objects by bringing their image inside such that the other is present whenever we imitate their moods, mannerisms, thoughts and desires. For Diana Fuss (1995) the Greek *metaphora*, or transport, immediately implicates the transferential act of identification in the rhetorical process of figuration.

A case in point is the dream of the failed supper party recounted to Freud by the woman he called *la belle bouchère*¹⁶².

I want to give a supper, but having nothing at hand except some smoked salmon, I think of going marketing, but I remember that it is Sunday afternoon, when all the shops are closed, I next try to telephone to some caterers, but the telephone is out of order. Thus I must resign my wish to have a supper.¹⁶³

She told Freud that her husband with whom she is very much in love had spoken of his intention to diet and on no account to accept invitations to dinner parties. She also mentions her fantasy of eating a bread roll with caviar each morning but has grudged the expense. Her husband had offered to buy her caviar but she refused on the grounds that she could tease him about it. She mentions that the day before she had visited a friend of whom she is jealous because her husband speaks highly of her. Fortunately, her husband prefers buxom women and this friend is very thin, although she now discloses her intention to put on weight. During the visit the friend asked her when she might be invited over again.

Freud provides two explanations for the dream in which identification plays a key role. Given that Diana Fuss (1995) mentions four other explanations, it seems clear that there is

¹⁵⁹ Krummeich & Lahm, (2010, 161).

¹⁶⁰ Freud, (1922).

¹⁶¹ Bronfenbrenner, (1960, 17).

¹⁶² The butcher's pretty wife.

¹⁶³ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, (1913, 123-128).

no simple independent way of judging the matter. Leaving aside the precise form in which it took, the one might thus generalize that the dream involved processes of identification.

Lacan developed Freud's account of ego-formation to argue that the individual mis-identifies with an image that affirms a sense of oneness, wholeness, mastery and self-containment that belies the yawning *béance*, or lack that is at the centre of their being, whilst for Ernest Becker, the harmonious self is formed as a protective skin to shield the individual from the existential terror of the reality of their mortality.¹⁶⁴ That the self is a necessary fabrication made up of identifications fundamentally challenges the idea of a real or authentic 'me' that lies beneath the set of identifications. Freud argued that identification also forms the basis of group psychology. The US Republican Party is an artificial group where members are bound to one another and with whoever is the leader, whilst the MAGA movement is a spontaneous grouping that specifically focuses on the personage of its leader. Freud wrote,

He need only possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in a particularly clearly marked and pure form, and need only give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido; and in that case the need for a strong chief will often meet him half-way and invest him with a predominance to which he would otherwise perhaps have had no claim. The other members of the group, whose ego ideal would not, apart from this, have become embodied in his person without some correction, are then carried away with the rest by 'suggestion', that is to say, by means of identification.¹⁶⁵

Freud cites Gustave Le Bon approvingly that, 'a group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association... and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable function'.¹⁶⁶ The formation of the group mind that is resistant to rational argument rests on identification as the most basic emotional tie by which the subject assumes the identity of the model.

Social Character

In Freud's conception, power does not just press in from the outside against an obdurate subject but plays a formative role in its construction such that the prevailing social organization foregrounds those personality traits that are congruent and suppresses those that are antithetical to its overall aims.¹⁶⁷ Different personality traits come to the fore

¹⁶⁴ For me, these psychoanalytically informed explanations provide a more satisfactory account of what Festinger called cognitive dissonance. The fundamental driver is the preservation of harmony and the rejection of threats to one's world-view.

¹⁶⁵ Freud, (1922) Part II.

¹⁶⁶ The imaginary and emotional nature of identification has the effect that group members are virtually impervious to rational argument. The MAGA movement is a good example, deflecting mention of the leader's grotesque narcissism, endemic lying, brutish incivility towards others and sexual violence towards women. The oft-quoted meme, "He could murder somebody and I'd still support him", if true, illustrates a abandonment of self to the other.

¹⁶⁷ David Riesman wrote that, "any sufficiently large society will throw up a slate of psychological types varied enough to suggest possibilities in many different directions" (Riesman, Preface to the 1961 edition, 2020: xxxviii).

depending on the child's response to social expectations, depending on the extent to which they negotiate and surmount developmental hurdles, from weaning to toilet training, and Oedipal identification. Interest in such characters has risen and fallen over the years and indeed in social theory the very notion of character has now been largely superseded by the more mobile concept of discourse.¹⁶⁸ Despite this, while discussion of the anal, hoarding character has largely waned,¹⁶⁹ the figure of the narcissist has largely retained its currency, appearing in critical works every decade or so as the character best suited to the capitalist social order.¹⁷⁰

The principal agency invoked in relation to the formation of social character is the superego, which Freud at one point likened to a garrison that society installed into the psyche. Norbert Elias (1939) relied on the strengthening of the superego in his great work on the civilizing process to explain the development of manners in modern Europe, which he ascribed to the development of Court Societies and a monopoly of violence in the hands of the sovereign. He argued that processes of psychologization and rationalisation worked in tandem to reduce overt displays of violence through repression and internalization of conflict into the individual psyche, leading to the formation of a pressure cooker self, where repressed violence manifested itself in neuroses and in other forms of psychological distress.

In contrast, Erich Fromm linked the marketing character to the development of exchange value in capitalism, describing this character as an individual who perceives themselves as a commodity for sale on the personality market, who projects an image that is amenable, upbeat and authentic, which belies the internal experience of meaninglessness and ennui it seeks to remedy through consumption.¹⁷¹ Fromm's observation might be seen as prescient in foreshadowing the rise to prominence of the individual personal brand.¹⁷² The explanation developed by Herbert Marcuse who also sought to fuse Marx with Freud, resonates with Marx's early argument that capitalist social relations reduce

¹⁶⁸ For example, in their study of fashion discourse, Thompson & Haytko, (1997, 17-18) describe two of their participants Hanna and Brandon as drawing from two different discourses on fashion as story lines to articulate their sense of identity, where Brandon "assumes a moralistic inner-directed stance" by comparison to Hanna, for whom high-fashion is "an idealised dream world".

¹⁶⁹ Haslam, (2011) argues that the anal character has since, "been recycled into a number of smaller but better ones", in relation to authoritarianism, conscientiousness, detail focus, disgust sensitivity, hoarding, obsessive-compulsive behaviour.

¹⁷⁰ See for example Lasch, 1979; Brennan, 1993; Twenge et al. (2014) – there are many more!

¹⁷¹ Fromm, (1976) (Holt). David Riesman separately identified similar changes in social character. The empirical study by Riesman et al. (1961) identified a shift from an "inner-directed" character guided by an internal gyroscope, to a vacillating chameleon-like and malleable 'other-directed' character, who was open to influence of consumerism.

¹⁷² See as one example, Avery, J. & R. Greenwald, (2023). A New Approach to Building Your Personal Brand. *Harvard Business Review*, May-June. The authors argue that to market oneself as a brand requires an audit one's social and cultural capital and the projection of a sense of personal distinctiveness in relation to the competition based on market research, development of a personal narrative and finally, embody your brand. The authors caution that, "In casual conversations, at parties, in job interviews, people are forming opinions about you whether you like it or not, and consciously or subconsciously, you're advertising yourself."

humans to the status of animals, by contending that the vital critical dimension of the ego is now blunted by an increasingly forceful superego that works in the interest of consumer capitalism.

Although the arguments from Dean MacCannell (2002), and Todd McGowan (2003), are based on Lacan, there are resonances with the above in their arguments that traditional prohibitions associated with the superego (“thou shalt not”) are transformed in capitalism to a morality that replaces values of moderation and self-restraint with one based on social Darwinist principles and the pursuit of *jouissance*.

While the arguments described above may make it seem that individuals took to capitalism like ducks to water, Ernest Dichter a dedicated advocate of consumer capitalism in the 1950s demurred, to argue that this transformation did not occur overnight and that even by the late 1950s, many Americans continued to feel that materialism is immoral and prosperity, ‘almost a sin’.¹⁷³ Indeed Dichter took it as his aim to counter these longstanding beliefs by describing the desire for physical goods as natural, signifying freedom, security, creativity and social recognition for the individual, even that goods have a ‘soul’.¹⁷⁴ Above all else Dichter railed against tradition, associating material consumption with progress¹⁷⁵ and as a duty on the grounds that if consumption is related solely to immediate needs, the economy will collapse.¹⁷⁶ The association of consumption with freedom had been made years earlier by Edward Bernays, who orchestrated and publicised the (in)famous pseudo-event he captioned ‘Torches of Freedom’, by persuading his secretaries and some other young women to join the St Patrick’s Day parade in New York City and ostentatiously smoke cigarettes.¹⁷⁷

What of social character today? Paul Verhaeghe (2012) notes that in many countries sexual displays and identities that were proscribed in the 1950s are now legitimate and from the huge change in the media landscape since the 1990s, are free to post whatever content they wish to anonymously on social media. Despite this he quotes Zygmunt Bauman that, “never have we been so free, never have we felt so powerless.”¹⁷⁸ What is going on? Verhaeghe describes the dominant characteristics of today’s society as driven by a norm of efficiency and a goal of material profit, where greed as the virtue. The one who prospers in this context has an inflated opinion of themselves, is good at manipulating others and at dissimulation and has a lack of empathy, corresponding in short to traits describing ‘normal’ narcissism and psychopathy. He identifies three broad groups. There are those raised in a “Make it or Break it” context, for whom the dominant concern is their own success; in contrast, ‘Pacifier Kids’ who are shielded from the

¹⁷³ Dichter (1960: ch. 13, 253).

¹⁷⁴ Dichter, (1960: ch. 5, esp. 85, 86).

¹⁷⁵ In one example he discusses how to persuade Brazilian women to abandon traditional sanitary practices they felt were ‘good enough’ (Dichter, 1960, 206).

¹⁷⁶ Dichter, (1960: ch. 8, 169).

¹⁷⁷ See Ewen, (1998) on Bernays and Boorstin, ([1962], 1992) on the idea of pseudo-events. In the political sphere such events which are unfortunately widespread are referred to as *astroturf* politics.

¹⁷⁸ References in this paragraph to Verhaeghe, (2012, 177-180).

realities of life, are taught that life is predictable, pleasure is normal and pain is avoidable, so that if anything goes wrong, it is someone else's fault; the final group comprises those diagnosed with some type of disorder.

One might add to this a pervading sense of suspicion. Criminals now widely avail of developments in Artificial Intelligence to construct sophisticated simulations to fool individuals into believing that they are actually giving money to colleagues, friends, relatives, or even themselves! Additionally, when front-stage individuals are constantly on-show and so must rigidly self-police their behaviour for fear that every gesture or nuance might be ineliminably recorded by someone and taken as a social offence that could result in them being cancelled, whilst back-stage, as if wearing Gyges' ring and so invisible to scrutiny to engage in their wildest and most depraved fantasies.

Lacan

In contrast to Freud, in the "French Freud" Lacan's negative ontology, lack is constitutive of the subject which can be filled neither by imaginary identifications nor by symbolic desire. Self-recognition in the mirror forms a conceptual space, "that is me!", thus opening the door for entry into the Symbolic, when according to Lacan the child is constituted as a fully human subject by accepting her castration before the Law where she must come to accept her subjection within the structure of language. For the human infant power is insinuated in the symbolic system of language that cuts into and organizes the body it renders intelligible. The subject is shaped in advance by the Symbolic order consisting of the categories of culture that simultaneously render her body intelligible. In relation to this, Althusser comments that the Symbolic order, "lurks there prior to birth, seizing on him from his very first cry to assign him to his place and role and thus his forced destination' (1996: 55).

That there is not much discussion nowadays about the Imaginary is possibly because this topic preoccupied Lacan in his first seminars and has since been displaced by his later focus on the Symbolic and latterly, the Real. The Imaginary order taken on its own is highly relevant to the understanding of power, in the Lacanian understanding, in Althusser's (1971) theory of ideology and as developed by Rene Girard, as the engine that drives the subject of mimetic desire. Imaginary identification forms the basis for bodily unity and self-continuity involving processes of self-identification that inform the image of a subject that presumes itself to be self-contained and self-directed and strives to live in harmony with itself. The Imaginary self is not monistic, as Lacan deploys the 'master-slave' tale from Hegel to describe this as a dual relation between a powerful mirror image that the individual identifies with which contrasts to internal feelings of loss and fragmentation, resulting in an oscillating see-saw relation of rivalry and hatred. The self develops as self-righteous and self-justifying, developing a variety of mechanisms for conserving itself and shifting blame onto others. Rivalry thrives in the absence of symbolic distance, as seems evident in the current algorithm-driven social media landscape. Through imagery, power reaches below the level of the subject to engage with the Imaginary interplay between self and other. In *Doppelgänger*, Naomi Klein describes in vivid detail how she was almost sucked into the stadium of desire

constructed by social media towards a malign focus on the other Naomi (Wolf), her doppelganger, (anti)model, rival, and for a time, the object of her obsession.¹⁷⁹ Klein points out that when confronted by very real dangers, a person can become entirely consumed by imaginary identifications with mirrored synthetic selves and manufactured realities, as at bottom there lurks what we cannot bear to see, in our own past, in our present and in the future racing towards us.¹⁸⁰

The Symbolic imposes a cultural grid framing inchoate experience, rendering it intelligible, for instance, by enabling us to assign names to our ailments, to name our body-parts and to communicate with others. The emergent subject is hemmed in by the imposition of the cultural order which specifies in advance our assignment to a gender role, a class position and a position within the family. In this sense as Althusser notes, we are 'always already' subjects. In the most obvious sense power is implicated in culture through the way in which a given society is organised, in relation to exchange the preponderance given to sharing, hierarchy, gift exchange or the market. Power resides in the differentiation of tasks and the allocation of roles and responsibilities and importantly in the arbiters of these functions. It is there too in the unspoken, implicit, taken for granted rules that seem to govern day to day life.

The individual becomes a subject by identifying with the paternal metaphor, the *nom du père*, taking the name of the father (nom) and by accepting his prohibition (non) against attempts to challenge his authority by continuing to act as the phallus of the mother.¹⁸¹ At this point desire to be the sole object of the (m)other's desire and desire for the mother is repressed into the unconscious. This allows for the installation into the psyche of the ego-ideal, related to the superego on condition that the child let's go of their Imaginary quest to be the phallus for the (m)other and acquiesces to the symbolic prohibition of the Name of the Father. Importantly, the ego-ideal provides respite from Imaginary rivalry by providing a third space for self-reflection. However, as Butler notes, this is always produced at a cost, 'and whatever resists the normative demand by which subjects are instituted remains unconscious'.¹⁸² Neurotic symptoms arise in response to the instalment of the paternal metaphor, whilst psychosis results from its violent repudiation and perversion from its disavowal. The hysteric who is distressed by repressed symptoms presents the other with the riddle of the Sphinx, by instituting the other whether as priest, faith-healer, medic or psychiatrist, as the one supposed to know the secret of her malady and discomfort. Her fundamental aim is to complete the other.¹⁸³ The obsessive on the other hand couldn't care less about the other, the epitome of the 'self-made man' who believes he doesn't owe anyone anything.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Klein, (2023).

¹⁸⁰ Klein, (2024, 322).

¹⁸¹ The father does not have to be a real, physical presence.

¹⁸² Butler, (1997, 86).

¹⁸³ Fink, (1997, ch.8 (esp. 145-160)

¹⁸⁴ Fink, 1997, ch.8 (esp. 130, 135-140).

In the above description, the 'neurotypical' individual describes the desire of the male, neurotic, consumer. The picture becomes a good deal more complex when one takes into account that the fundamental fantasy of the individual might be structured as "female" in relation to sexuation, as psychotic, by rejecting the insistent advances of the Other, or as perverse, by disavowing the Other. Lacanian analysts further distinguish between paranoia and schizophrenia. For the psychotic character the Other keeps insisting but there is no traction as they are not rooted in the Other, so dominant forms of identification are Imaginary (rivalry) or Real (Phantasmic). Rik Loose (2002) argues that the flat over-repressed neurotic seeks drug experiences to boost their *jouissance*, whereas the individual with a psychotic character who is fizzing with *jouissance* seeks out opiates to alleviate thrumming tension. Schizophrenics are a small but nonetheless significant group and in the general population studies suggest that the number of those who hear voices is between 5% and 28% of the population in the USA.¹⁸⁵

The variety of responses to the installation of the paternal signifier from the Other can be understood as challenges to the cultural insistence that one assumes a coherent subjectivity in line with a pre-ordained identity. Here the psyche overflows the rational subject as the site of Imaginary identifications, unconscious phantasies and *jouissance*. For Judith Butler such resistance to normalization offers a critique to Foucault as, 'The psyche is what resists the regularization that Foucault ascribes to normalizing discourses'.¹⁸⁶ Repression of the phallic signifier founds the unconscious. A bar is created that separates unconscious signification from conscious thought. The conscious *moi*, of homo economicus is an imaginary construction believing itself to be self-contained and self-directed whilst it is simultaneously subject to and spoken by the unconscious. Psychoanalysis asks, when the subject speaks, who is actually speaking? Once the subject has accepted the paternal metaphor their repressed desire forms the unconscious where it operates according to metaphor by condensing memories and by displacing them onto innocuous material through metonymy. The unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the Other. Given the importance of speech in psychoanalysis Lacan argued that there is a non-correspondence between what the "I of the analysand says, which is the enunciation, and the enoncé, or written equivalent, or as it is sometimes known, between the saying and the said.¹⁸⁷ Lacan initially contrasted the "full

¹⁸⁵ De Lede et al., (2013).

¹⁸⁶ For further complexity see also p. 94, where she discusses possibilities for resignification, then asking from a psychoanalytic perspective, whether resistance to a subjectivating power can be derived from what is "in" or "of" discourse?" (ibid., 94).

¹⁸⁷ There is a lot going on here where Lacan is at his most enigmatic. For instance, when stating that "language is the murder of the thing", Lacan is reiterating Kojève's point that the moment one utters a signifier such as say 'lion', one invents it in one's imagination whilst simultaneously abolishing it as a tangible thing at the same time. Say elephants says Lacan and, there is a whole herd in the room, present in its absence. In this respect, to say that language is the manifestation of the negativity of the subject that imposes itself by negating the 'real' means that it works by manifesting what is not. As Kojève wrote, it presents the absence of a reality and thus manifests the disappearing "nothing" that is the subject of desire. The subject speaks in language whilst at the same time abolishing itself there, in just the way that the lion or dog are abolished. To say "I" is to say "I am nothing, or I am dead, or I am pure non-existent negativity". in other words, the subject of the enunciation disappears by appearing in the subject of the enoncé, which presents the subject in its absence. Source: (Borch-Jacobsen & Brick, (1989: esp. 93)

speech” of the unconscious subject with the self-justifying “empty speech” of the analysand, later switching to discuss this in relation to desire. There is a split between the “I” of the enunciation of the one who speaks and the grammatical “I” of the subject in the statement. The words that she uses carry a meaning that exceeds the one she hoped to convey when he opened her mouth, so it is through the act of enunciation that unconscious processes are manifested. The subject that is revealed is not the same as the subject that is speaking. In other words, an unconscious production is one in which you do not recognise yourself in what you have actually said. This is an experience well-known to anyone who has undertaken analysis, where the signifier represents the subject for another signifier.

The desire of the neurotic subject is repressed while continuing to exert pressure through the action of unconscious processes and revealing itself through slips. Desire is not simply what is expressed by the subject for an object but is situated with respect to the discourse of the Other, from the prevailing symbolic order. Given the indeterminacy of language which is based on difference, the prevailing symbolic order offers master signifiers as ideological anchor points for identification. In contemporary consumer capitalism one’s lack of being is converted to a lack of having. Years ago the “good life” was associated with the latest goods, such as a car, or ice-cream maker, although they were buying into an ideology of progress and efficiency, as well as a product. The preoccupation with goods has since ceded some ground to signifiers associated with “wellness” and a “full life”, which are linked to experiences. One trekking company newsletter I received relatively recently celebrated one loyal couple who had travelled under their auspices on a hundred “adventures” to far-flung places, many of which were sold as ‘trips of a lifetime’.

Object a

Lacan once commented that the concept of object a, the object cause of desire, was his primary contribution to psychoanalysis. There is a considerable elasticity in this concept given that Lacan developed his thinking on it over his lifetime. Object a is not actually an object but arises from the experience of lack of being in the Real, and lack of Imaginary fullness with the (m)Other. Object a retains elements of Freud’s theorisation of character formation in relation to oral, scopophilic, sado-masochistic and anal fixations. In Freud’s theorisation these are reversible such that scopophilia involves voyeurism of looking or being looked at; orality as eating the other or being eaten by them, and anality as retentiveness or wastefulness. It is a remainder that reminds us of our prior fullness of being, a lack peculiar to each individual that draws our fascination, whether a wistful smile, a playful childishness, or perhaps a look, that we find irresistible. Bruce Fink (2011), argues that object a can explain why, when relationships end, one partner can find it so difficult to let go, because they continue to pin object a onto their former partner.

For Žižek object a is the basis of the sublime object of ideology that structures our desire. There is no question of imposition of an ideology here because object a is an intrinsic feature of subjectivity and so desire is experienced as the subject’s own. The sublime object is an everyday object that has the aura of the Thing. Lacan’s friend the surrealist

Salvador Dali understood very well, as do brands such as *Hermes* and *Selfridges*, that in a commercial setting the shop window is the perfect lure to inflame the desire of the one situated on the other side of the transparent barrier.¹⁸⁸ The shop window illustrates perhaps better than advertising, how object a is not the thing itself, but rather forms the structure by which desire is itself created as the sublime object that gives phantasmatic support to ideological structures. For Marx the reproduction of subjectivity is linked to the reproduction of capitalism which recreates itself through us. The commodity fetish has magical properties, not just in relation to branding but also in relation to how as an object, it recreates the formal relations of exchange. For Žižek the central question is to locate where our desire is coming from so that we can seek to liberate ourselves from the pre-ordained phantasmatic frames of capitalist incentive structures we experience as being our own desires. Like Bartleby the Scrivener, we can respond by saying “I prefer not to”. Additionally, although marketers and advertisers are skilled at exploiting our desire, they can only hope to recreate this structure which has its origin in a primary loss of plenitude.

Finally in relation to object a, Althusser’s (1971) formulation of ideology has been critiqued as being over-socialized, by passing over the kernel of the non-symbolizable and unassimilable remainder of the Real that like a bit of gristle, sticks in the symbolic gullet that cannot digest it. Butler cites Dolar’s argument in this vein that Althusser does not fully take into account the ‘remainder’, ‘the non-phenomenal ‘kernel of interiority’ that remains following subjectivation.¹⁸⁹

Four discourses¹⁹⁰

Lacan’s later development of the four discourses has a direct bearing on questions of power. These outline four formal subject positions, comprising, the master, the university, the hysterical split subject and object-a. The discourse of the master circles around a master signifier that retroactively gives meaning to the knowledge and truth processes around it. The master signifier is empty, there is no need for legitimacy as it is underpinned by the symbolic authority of the Big Other, say of the monarch or the president. I listen not to truth or reason or politics but am simply embody power as my true will. Some argue that the symbolic authority of the master has slipped, citing examples of bosses who want to be seen as part of the team, parents who want to be

¹⁸⁸ Dali dressed the shop window of the Bonwit Teller department store on fifth Avenue, New York in 1936, commenting, By way of demonstration, I accepted an offer to dress one of the windows of Bonwit-Teller’s shop with a surrealist display. I used a manikin whose head was made of red roses and who had fingernails of ermine fur. On a table, a telephone transformed into a lobster; hanging on a chair, my famous “aphrodisiac coat” (Othman, 2022: 42-42). While I could not trace this particular image, similar ones are located at Worsinger Photo, Museum of the City of New York, see <https://collections.mcny.org/Collection/-Surrealist-window-at-Bonwit-Teller---2F34089IVN1.html>

¹⁸⁹ Butler, (1997, 122).

¹⁹⁰ Lacan, J. (1971). The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVIII 1970-1971. *On a discourse that might not be a semblance*, Cormac Gallagher (trans.), Lacan in Ireland. <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/translations/seminars/>

their children's best friend, and Prime Ministers who say that they are merely "following the science". Here the master actually refuses to fill the role of Master, thus stimulating calls for a 'real' master to arise, which in Lacan's view threatens the return of repressed obscene power. Rise of the far right today in the face of permacrisis - a return of the repressed obscene power.

The university discourse does not just refer to the academy but to the panoply of experts who purport that there is a science of objective truth with which the master can be filled with verifiable knowledge.

The one in the position of the hysteric asks the master 'tell me who I am'. During an increasingly rambunctious talk that Lacan gave to students at Vincennes in 1969, he asked them what was it that those in '68 were rebelling against? Lacan then placed his student in the position of the hysteric, describing them as helots (slaves or collaborators with the regime) who framed their aspiration to revolution in relation to the discourse of the Master, "what you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one."¹⁹¹

Finally, there is the position of the analyst who has no stake in the game, who refuses to follow the script provided them by the analysand, to affirm – but rather changes the stakes so that eventually the subject can assume his own truth or the figure of empty authority.

Lacan later developed a fifth discourse he named the capitalist discourse, which he suggested, transforms the way in which the subject traditionally takes shape, and gives rise to new symptoms, as well as consumerist requests for help. What is characteristic of the consumerist request for help is that it ignores unconscious truth. The capitalist discourse, "exists in a curious copulation with science".¹⁹² Science ensures the production of knowledge (S2) through which S1 becomes ever more innovative, such that old answers must be answered by new ones. The solutions proffered by S1 are not fixed but endlessly new and better. As noted by Vanhuele (2016) the only thing missing is the consumer who frames their lack in terms of the gap in the market that is delineated by S2, and who believe in S1.

In the discourse of the hysteric, the discontent of the subject is addressed to the master, or the one who is supposed to know who is made equally responsible for addressing their distress by helping bring their unconscious knowledge to the surface. Vanhuele invokes the dream of *La Belle Bouchere* (The beautiful butcher's wife) first described by Freud to illustrate the process of dream analysis. The woman loved caviar but forbade her husband from buying it for her, whilst she knew that her friend loved smoked salmon, but in the dream, was unable to buy it. In the analysis of the dream smoked salmon and

¹⁹¹ Lacan, (1969), *Television*, 3rd December, 107. By this I take it that he is referring to a monstrous image of the obscene master such as that embodied by Goya in *Saturn Devouring his Son*. For real-life comparisons the 'usual suspects' are Stalin and Mao; Putin and Ping might just squeeze in – but Trump is arguably nothing more than a simulacrum of the obscene father. There are frequent complaints today in the "West" that we lack "strong government", that 'democracy isn't working' and in response there are plenty of candidates who assert that they will make the country 'great' again – as if it was ever great in the first place – without providing any plan as to how this will be achieved.

¹⁹² Lacan, J. Seminar of 1969-1970: *L'envers de psychanalyse*, 110.

caviar play an illustrative role in relation to desire by exemplifying fears in relation to food and the hidden rivalries that haunt relationships. The last thing imaginable is that all would have been well if the butcher's wife actually had been able to purchase smoked salmon and had in stock! In contrast, capitalist discourse would have mistaken her problematic desire as a frustrated demand that could be satisfied. The solution offered by capitalism to the butcher's wife would simply be to go out and buy smoked salmon or caviar. By offering pat, simple solutions capitalist discourse occludes discussion of deeper issues pertaining to love and unfulfilled desire. It completely sidelines the role of the unconscious knowledge that produces distress. When everything is always about gratifying demand an entire dimension is lost, as fundamental questions are left unaddressed. Once purchased the product quickly loses its aura. It never lives up to its initial promise that was in any event doomed from the start, as the result of the conflation of specific demands with mobile desire.

Bryant (2008, 13) from Žižek, that under the regime of capitalism, the subject's principal question is not "what do I desire" but "what *should* I desire," which is "not a question about objects, but a question of those conditions under which the subject might be desired by the Other." This takes up the position of the hysteric for whom desire is essentially mediated by the desire of the Other. Within capitalist discourse this implies that merchandise will not so much be preferred for its intrinsic qualities, but in terms of how it is evaluated by the other. Indeed, this is often how marketing proceeds, by associating products as highly desired by successful celebrities and influencers they signal the viewer's discontent and so direct their desire to consume.

Homo Mimeticus

Homo mimeticus poses a challenge to the conception of homo economicus as self-directed, by arguing that human subjectivity is inter-dividual and that mimetic desire forms the basis of all human striving. René Girard's conception of mimesis is closely related to concepts such as sympathy and imitation. In terms of neural processes sympathy, which is the capacity to "enter into the feelings of others" noted by Adam Smith, is a pre-requisite for mimetic desire, has been found to rest on a substrate of mirror neurons.¹⁹³ Additionally, research confirms the importance of over-imitation to cultural learning in humans who have been found to repeat redundant steps in a problem-solving sequence demonstrated by a model, which monkeys quickly dispense with to develop leaner, faster, solutions.¹⁹⁴

Girard argued more broadly that we humans do not just desire objects but like other animals, we desire the desire of those others whom we take as our models. Moreover, while strict hierarchies restrain and contain outbreaks of mimetic violence that occur in animal societies, when two hands reached for the same object, the containment of such violence posed a major threat to the survival of early human collectives. In his view, lacking symbolic controls, mimetic rivalry played havoc in archaic human communities, reaching epidemic proportions that spilled over into violence and threatened the existence of the entire social order. Respite was gained only following the seizure and collective sacrifice of a scapegoat, who was subsequently sacralised, forming the basis for the establishment of more stable forms for the prohibition and containment of mimetic rivalry involving formal religion, social hierarchy, the law and media for exchange.¹⁹⁵

Girard thus poses important questions for the assumptions behind *homo economicus*, that posit a simple relation between an individual and the object of their desire. For Girard, desire is triangular, involving a subject, the individual they take as their model, and the object which the model possesses which the subject desires. There are similarities with the realm of the Imaginary described by Lacan, in that the object is not desirable in itself, but is charged only because the model desires it, who appears complete and successful by comparison with the subject. The object comes into view as the 'X' that marks the crucial difference that separates the powerful model from the lacking subject. This need not be a physical object but could be an idea or even a person. In the case of a 'love triangle', as the story progresses, the supposed object (person) of desire can fade into the background, as the rivalry between the suitors takes centre stage. Indeed the 'object' can quickly lose appeal for the subject from the moment the model's desire alights onto another object. As is further discussed below, Girard's concept of external mediation has resonances with the Lacanian Symbolic.

¹⁹³ Gallese & Goldman, (1998).

¹⁹⁴ See for example, McGuigan, et al. (2011).

¹⁹⁵ Girard, (1979).

Given that the market society actively invites social comparison and mimetic rivalry a pertinent question is why do we not see massive outbreaks of mimetically inspired violence today? Orléan (1989), sought to reconcile Girard's mimetic theory with neoclassical economics by distinguishing routine goods from status goods. With respect to the former, consumers have relatively fixed preferences and given that they know the worth of the goods on offer, they see no need to imitate what others do. The situation is quite different with scarce goods such as luxuries, or property, where prices bubbles build quickly so that it can be rational to imitate the desires of others. Examples of such madness down the centuries attest to the disastrous consequences of such perverse spirals, from the feverish tulip mania that enveloped Europe in the seventeenth-century, to the South Sea Bubble, that occurred a century later, and more recently, the housing "sub-prime" crisis which precipitated the 2008 financial crash. Indeed one of the key questions confronting policy-makers in a capitalistic market system is how to avoid 'boom and bust' cycles.

While Orléan's paper is interesting, it arguably focuses too much on goods and insufficiently on mimetic desire, which knows no clear boundaries. Mimesis fundamentally involves a function of dependence on another's desire. The subject does not know what he wants, never mind what he prefers, and is dependent on the model for both. Girard differentiates two environments for mimesis comprising internal mediation and external mediation. In the situation of internal mediation, the subject takes as their model someone who is in their immediate social circle. Let us say that Jim has fixated on Jane who is a member of his social circle as his model. During a brief conversation at a social event Jane casually mentions her plan to go on a trek around Mont Blanc. Later Jim, who previously had not considered himself particularly athletic or adventurous and had never considered this before, feels gripped by the idea to do something equally adventurous and books a trekking holiday. Over the years Jim and Jane meet off and on and when they do, Jim casually recounts tales of his latest adventure such as his recent trip to the Himalaya. Jane notices Jim's cool and rather smug behaviour when in her company. When they meet a year later at a mutual friend's party, Jim discovers that Jane has since been on treks to remote parts of Chile and Mongolia and as she describes her experiences is particularly irked by her smile, which he finds condescending. Jim upsets his hosts and surprises even himself by constantly interrupting and disparaging everything Jane says, to which she responds in turn, resulting in a furious row.

Considering the above example from a Girardian perspective an important point is that Jim and Jane are peers so there is no social or symbolic distance between them. At the initial meeting Jim unconsciously finds himself lacking with respect to Jane and identifies this crucial difference in her quest for adventure. This provides the motive for him to desire what she desires. To begin with the object is all that seems to matter, but as Jim becomes more proficient, the object of desire (adventurousness) fades into the background, and Jim and Jane become what Girard calls 'monstrous doubles' who are drawn into a cyclothymic spiral of rivalry, each swinging from surges of gleeful superiority at their latest success, or at the other's failure, to crashing despair when the other triumphs. Naomi Klein's highly nuanced account describes in arresting detail her fluctuating feelings of superiority, annoyance and spiralling rivalry with her doppelganger

Naomi Wolf, and the considerable difficulties she experienced in trying to surmount this. Girard might have argued that such destructive mirroring was accentuated not just because bad behaviour is encouraged and monetised by algorithms but crucially, because of the lack of any of the symbolic barriers that prevail in face-to-face encounters between subject and model in the virtual context.¹⁹⁶

Jim does not really know what he wants, over and above the sense of adventure that he lacks and Jane seems to possess. He looks to Jane's desire to inform him as to what he should desire, so that he can be like that. In the above example it does not follow that Jim is simply imitating another person who is "adventurous" whom he is trying to outdo. Jim could be engaged in 'negative imitation', by adopting a behavioural stance that is the opposite of the model, who perhaps lives a frugal, sedentary life. While in this situation Jim would not be formally imitating the model of his desire, the important thing is that his desire is still dependent on, and indeed might be rigidly fixated, on the model's desire.

The situation of Jim and Jane described above is one of internal mediation, where each is a peer within the same social circle, such that no social or symbolic distance separates them. In contrast, in contexts of external mediation individuals are separated by symbolic distance. Girard for instance discusses how Sancho Panza who is from a different class to Don Quixote lacks any desire for the objects his master desires.¹⁹⁷ He thus views symbolic distinctions based on caste or on class hierarchy as brakes on the spread of mimetic desire, where individuals are raised to value and desire different objects, as in the situation of *amor fati* described by Bourdieu. In the situation of external mediation, the subject does not take the other as the model for their desire because of the symbolic distance that separates them. In addition to authority ranking, reciprocal gift exchange provides symbolic distance by laying down a clear formula for conduct, so that when I give you something, I demonstrate my superiority and prestige, forcing you to reciprocate, in order to reinstate balance. While some elevate the selfless beauty of the freely given gift as one of the most noble of human acts, Girard points to the potential violence that underlies the gift, at one point offering the mundane example of the aspiring mafioso who hangs about a café, building his circle of obligation from the ground up by offering "free" coffee to those who subsequently become his marks. Dumouchel (2001) points out that violence is deeply implicated in the circle of gift exchange as it will ensue if the debt incurred through the obligation to reciprocate is not honoured, such that members of the gift community are likewise beholden to use violence to defend against outside attack. In such situations obligations that in the daily course of events protect individuals from violence can actually stoke conflict, leading to a tit-for-tat spiral of recrimination when employed as means to take revenge on outsiders who do the community harm.

Dumouchel argues that money exchange offers a more secure form of external mediation by creating an even more distant relation between subject and model, as it breaks the circle of the gift and so frees buyer and seller from ties of reciprocity. While the thick bonds of community are shorn, on the other hand, the abandonment of reciprocal

¹⁹⁶ Klein, N. (2024). *Doppelgänger: A trip into the mirror world*, London & NY: Penguin.

¹⁹⁷ Girard, (1961).

obligations can prevent mimetic violence from spreading to others. On the downside, unlike gift communities which strive for balance, the growth imperative demanded by the capitalist market facilitates and indeed thrives off mimetic desire. Consequently, capitalist societies consist of a, “bubbling stew of violent competitive energies” restrained by the symbolic distance put in place by the market itself, by law, and ultimately by the monopoly of violence enforced by the state.

Since its inception modern marketing has employed images of desirable celebrities as models to create brand appeal. However, except in exceptional circumstances¹⁹⁸ nothing used to come of this in relation to mimetic violence, as celebrities exist in another universe that is materially distant and symbolically sacralised and so unreachable to most. The situation is different today as a vast web of “influencers” has spread on social media, where it is possible that the influencer is known to those who imitate their desire. A UK Parliamentary report mentioned that, “(m)any of the influencers we have spoken to say they face significant online abuse and trolling”. While one contributor mentioned that, “it comes with the territory”, another declared that, “abuse can be “relentless” and result in mental health issues for influencers”, with one contributor expressing concern that there will be more cases of suicide and depression among them. One witness, Dr Crystal Abidin told the committee that the most significant problem facing influencers in her research areas of China, Japan and Korea is suicide as a result of online bullying.¹⁹⁹

Girard’s theory illustrates the extent to which we live inside each other’s heads, sharing the same desires, fears and anxieties. It also illustrates the endless, silent behind-the-scenes nature of comparison of oneself to others, comparisons that cut every way in which one can identify oneself to others. It explains the fundamental desire to be *somebody*, to be the best, no matter how bizarre or life-threatening that may be, whether the best fighter, ultra-marathon runner, gang member, long-distance swimmer, mountain-climber, or copycat suicide, such that in any event you will have the best funeral!

Instances of monstrous doubling are more visible today in the era of social media, in which context it is noteworthy that *Facebook* received its first capital input from billionaire disrupter Peter Thiel, who skewed Girard to his own pecuniary advantage by seeing the massive potential of fostering rather than damping down mimesis. Thiel put it that, “competitors tend to become obsessed with their rivals at the expense of their substantive goals, and because of that... the intensity of competition doesn't tell you anything about underlying value. People will compete fiercely for things that don't matter, and once they're fighting they'll fight harder and harder.”²⁰⁰ Arnaud Auger has called Girard

¹⁹⁸ See for example Jack Jones’ account of how Mark Chapman’s adulation turned to hatred against his model, John Lennon. Jones, J. (1993). *Let Me Take You Down: Inside the Mind of Mark David Chapman, the Man Who Killed John Lennon*, London: Virgin Books.

¹⁹⁹ Digital, Culture, Media, Sport Committee, (2022). *Influencer culture: Lights, camera, inaction. Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report*, Twelfth Report of Session 2021-2022: House of Commons, 9th May, pp. 9-10.

²⁰⁰ Feloni, Richard, (2014). Peter Thiel explains how an esoteric philosophy book shaped his worldview. *Business Insider*, 10th November. <https://www.businessinsider.com/peter-thiel-on-rene-girards-influence-2014-11>.

the godfather of the “like” button.²⁰¹ While this had not been invented in 2004, when Thiel made his investment into *Facebook*, the seeming anonymity of the platform provides cover for individuals to openly express opinions they would never previously have dared to in the company of others. Geoff Shullenberg perceptively argued that “objects” such as likes, up-votes, reblogs, re-tweets and comments are all visible signals of the other’s desire. The more mediated through the other’s desire (by being liked and so on), the more prominent a post becomes on one’s feed and hence the more desirable, such that desire begets desire,

...social media platforms perpetually enjoin users, through various means, to enter the iterative chain of mimesis: to signal their desires to other users, eliciting further desires in the process. The algorithms driving social media, as it turns out, are programmed on mimetic principles.²⁰²

That one’s social capital rests on ‘likes’ to one’s last post, leading to rapid oscillations in users from pride and celebration to shame and despair, is it any wonder that social media use is linked to anxiety? In such contexts the individual is driven by a desire they are possibly unaware of and caught in an imaginary web of relations with others they see no prospect of escaping from with consequences that can be all too real.²⁰³

From the above, homo mimeticus is fundamentally different to homo economicus in that his preferences are not fixed, but depend crucially on the preferences of others.²⁰⁴ Because mimetic desire is inter-individual, featuring relations between individuals, it is expressed differently in different inter-individual contexts. Spiralling rivalry is best observed in relatively closed social contexts. Low-budget television producers were attracted by the spectacle of rivalry between families from the UK “traveller” community.²⁰⁵ The man, who still occupies the traditional role as provider for his family, signifies his status in relation to other men in terms of how “big” the wedding is in terms of its extravagance and cost, while each successive bride signifies her status by wearing a dress that is wider and heavier than those of her predecessors. Such tight-knit communities are very much the exception today and generally it seems that the market has acted as a distancing mechanism that offers a proliferation of celebrity models and a seemingly endless variety of objects on which desire can alight. However, the situation is fluid and seems to be changing rapidly in the social media landscape.

Girard’s insight into the inter-individual nature of desire invites discussion as to whether the pathologisation of the individual in current medical practice is adequate to the task, or

²⁰¹ Shullenberger, G. (2016). Mimesis, violence and Facebook: Peter Thiel’s French Connection, *Cyborgology*, 13th August. <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2016/08/13/mimesis-violence-and-facebook-peter-thiels-french-connection-full-essay/>

²⁰² Shullenberg, G. (2016). Mimesis, Violence, and Facebook: Peter Thiel’s French Connection (Full Essay), *Cyborgology*, 13th August.

²⁰³ See Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation*, London & NY: Penguin.

²⁰⁴ See for example, Dumouchel (2012) critique of rationality of homo economicus.

²⁰⁵ Channel 4, (2011). *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, UK.

whether it contributes to the problem. If mimesis is endemic then is it advisable to group those diagnosed with addictions or eating disorder together in rehabilitation units where silent and potentially lethal games of inter-individual rivalry can be played out unseen by those in charge?

Dumouchel (2014) criticizes the individualism prevalent in capitalist societies by offering an inter-individual account of scarcity. The liberal and neoliberal economic argument for scarcity is as the necessary foundation for the economy as the engine that spurs innovation and growth. Such a presumption informed the actions of the Argentinian government headed by Javier Gerardo Milei, beloved of anarcho-capitalists and of Donald Trump, whose policies halved the rate of inflation in just one year, while the proportion of those at or below the poverty line rose to over fifty percent of the population.²⁰⁶ For Dumouchel (ibid.), scarcity is not a natural given, nor is it a socially constructed term, but rather, socially instituted. This is because the very idea of scarcity would be foreign to inhabitants of a society organised around principles of gift exchange, which obligates reciprocity and solidarity such that, “no member of a group is in danger of dying unless all are”. While people may starve, this would be taken not be taken as a sign of scarcity, but rather as a moral failure of individuals to meet created by reciprocal obligation was broken with the introduction of money exchange which substituted a distant and detached relation for ties that once bound the individual to the community. As ties of solidary obligation loosened, so scarcity, linked to lack of resources came to be seen as the problem.

Pankaj Mishra antedates Girard’s ideas on mimetic rivalry to the antagonism between Voltaire and Rousseau involving the former’s claim, in relation to the rising class of bourgeoisie, that *amour propre* and the pursuit of self-interest are essential to the operation of society, whilst Rousseau warned that such a society, based not on real needs but on the desire to surpass others will end in deceit and violence.²⁰⁷ Focussing at the level of the nation state Mishra argues that ressentiment bred from a lack of recognition and respect from the West have been key factors motivating the actions of colonised elites and in other countries beyond the European Pale. He describes “an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness” experienced by those from the Indian sub-continent towards the “mother country” where many had been educated (and patronised), involving an ambivalent, bifurcated identity...of ‘cringe and hate’ towards their overlords who treated them with contempt as backward and effeminate. Such treatment in his view fuelled programmes of ruthless national self-assertion by fascists, anarchists and revolutionaries who were enflamed by their reading amongst others, of Nietzsche, Herbert Spencer, Mazzini, D’Annunzio and Sorel, to construct grand visions of the nation as a coherent community of patriotic citizens furnished with a splendidly unique and exceptional history, achievable by testosterone

²⁰⁶ Nugent, C. (2024). Argentina’s poverty rate soars above 50% under Javier Milei. *Financial Times*, 26th September. Initial report from Torcuato Di Tella University.

²⁰⁷ Rousseau defined *amour propre* from *amour de soi*, in the Second Discourse, on the Origins of Inequality among Men (1755),

fuelled ideal of self-overcoming heroism involving blood and sacrifice of self and of others to realise this vision of progress.²⁰⁸

Mishra contends that nowadays, resentment is felt most keenly in societies that claim to be meritocratic and egalitarian that invite individuals to engage in invidious comparison. As upward mobility is restricted to just a few, for members of excluded minorities or those of the majority whose standard of living and future prospects have declined, stories that feed narratives of lost national, ethnic or religious greatness, or admixtures of all three, act as powerful binding agents to inflame and incite. On the one hand there are insurgencies by minorities denied social recognition and legitimation, such as the Tamils, Nagas, Kashmiri's and Palestinians, while on the other, illiberal democracies in India, Hungary, the Czech Republic and the USA and sustain large minorities of the disaffected in France, Germany and the UK.

Sheila Fitzpatrick's review of two Russian studies of the Cold War period lends support to Mishra's argument. These authors argue that during this period Russia was less interested in victory and more concerned with winning the respect of their mightier Western foe, as despite its nuclear arsenal the Soviet Union was weaker than the USA economically and generally militarily. Resentment led to the Soviet Union modelling its strategy on that pursued by its rival; for instance, the authors argue that although its arguments were couched in the language of anti-imperialism, the main reason behind the Soviet Union seeking client states in the Middle-East and Third World had little to do with the spread of communist ideology and much more to do with matching the USA and the emergent China. In an unlikely twist, the process of détente entered into by Nixon and Brezhnev in the early 1970's offered the prospect of moving beyond the mimetic tussle of "winning" or "losing" the Cold War.

While the Nixon-Breshnev engagement offered a sliver of hope, the process of détente foundered following the Helsinki Accords of 1975, when US President Jimmy Carter and others leveraged the Accords to attack the Soviet Union for human rights violations. Fitzpatrick argues that the Soviets, who were "extremely sensitive to anything that smacked of condescension, were "embarrassed by this turn of events...such a teacher-student relationship was fundamentally incompatible with the Soviet sense of self-importance'.²⁰⁹ Fitzpatrick recounts that when Ronald Reagan became President in the 1980s, he was surprised to learn that the Soviets were just as scared of the Americans as the Americans were of them. Mikhail Gorbachev is described as a true radical by envisaging, 'an idealistic joint process with the West for a nuclear-free Europe and a common European home...who did the unthinkable and walked away from Eastern Europe'.²¹⁰ In the view of one of the authors this was when 'Moscow briefly stood as a city on the hill, showing the way to a brave

²⁰⁸ Mishra points out in relation to the infamous adage, "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs", imperialists had earlier abrogated to themselves the God-given power to mould their colonies and the people who lived in them to their own image, which might have required some heads to be chopped off (252). Later sacrifices in the name of progress were made by Hitler, Stalin and Mao (Mishra, 2017, 252).

²⁰⁹ Fitzpatrick, Sheila, (2025). Not corrupt enough, *London Review of Books*, 20th March, 15-18. Books reviewed by Sergey Radchenko, *To run the world: the Kremlin's Cold War bid for global power*, Cambridge University Press; Vladislav Zubok, *The world of the Cold War 1945-1991*, Pelican.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

new world'. Fitzpatrick reads Gorbachev's attempt as the most successful, "of a long line of Soviet attempts to be recognized as America's equal", such that the Soviet Union could work in tandem to lead the world to a better future. That this did not work out is laid largely at the door of the Americans who still wanted to call the shots. It seems that what rankled especially for Russians was George H.W. Bush's assertion in his State of the Union address in 1992, that America won the Cold War, "a message that was hard to swallow".²¹¹ The authors mention that Boris Yeltsin reiterated Gorbachev's call that the USA and now the Russian Federation be 'special allies in the building of a new world order', an aspiration the US never took as plausible which Fitzpatrick describes as fantasy; 'the US had to be stronger'. Then came Putin who took office as President in 2000 for whom resentment was as ingrained to his personality as the lettering on a stick of rock, seeing Russia as a great power that had been wilfully reduced by his predecessors. Fitzpatrick includes a snippet from Putin's speech aimed at the USA, on the second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,

Where does this insolent manner of speaking from the position of your own exceptionalism, infallibility and all-permissiveness come from? Wherefrom does that condescending, arrogant attitude towards the interests and absolutely legitimate demands?²¹²

Fitzpatrick notes that while Radchenko refers to the above as "raving" and which she herself admits "certainly sounds a bit unhinged", it echoes the sentiments expressed by Putin's predecessors "from Stalin to Yeltsin".

What shape does resistance to power take in Girard's theory? For Girard, the keystone of resistance is for the victim to suppress the urge for reprisals and to forego the sacrifice or scapegoating of others in order to close off the spiral of mimetic rivalry.²¹³ Many would argue the impossibility turning the other cheek for those confronted with the rawness of their loss and humiliation. Yet Hodge (2011), offers the astonishing example of the Suai community in East Timor who symbolically reenacted scenes from the massacre of their people by the Indonesian paramilitaries without resorting to calls to vengeance, or retaliatory violence.

²¹¹ Ibid., 18.

²¹² Ibid., 18. *Russian Media Monitor* formed by Julia Davis provides a window into the truly unhinged world of Russian broadcaster RT, which since February 2022 has featured astonishing outbursts of hubristic hatred directed against the West from "anchors" Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov. From a Girardian perspective their frequent calls for nuclear Armageddon no longer focus on the object but entirely on the destruction of the model, imagined as some fantasy of an evil "West".

²¹³ Girard & Grayson, (2016).

Homo Deonstruktivus

From their survey of the literature Downey et al (2014) reported their surprise that by 2008, at the time of the global financial crash and the imposition of austerity programmes when capitalism seemed to be on its knees, ideology critique had virtually disappeared from discussion in academic journals. The authors noted that this was paralleled by a concomitant rise in identity politics, and its split from discussions of capitalism and class. Stuart Hall (1985), dated the origins of this rift to Louis Althusser's (1971) piece on the ISA's, which fatefully, according to Hall, split discussion of class reproduction from subjectivity, leading to a subsequent "bifurcation" between theorists of a marxist bent who stuck with class reproduction and those who focused instead on questions of subjectivity and identity, a split which, 'has had the most disastrous consequences for the unevenness of the subsequent development of the problematic of ideology, not to speak of its damaging political effects.' (Hall, 1985: 103). Laying aside discussion of whether or not it is fair to blame Althusser, there seems little doubt that in hindsight, the shift in emphasis by the progressive liberal cultural elite away from questions of class reproduction and the concerns of the working class to identity politics has indeed had a profound effect.

By focusing on the rarified world of the academy, Downey et al. (2014) overlooked a version of the ideology thesis which had spilled out into the real world where it continued to proliferate. Like characters from *The Godfather*, on whom real mafiosi purportedly model their image, the message of *The Matrix* (1997) with its vision of a 'red pill/blue pill' world resonated with real-world experiences of the disaffected, from young male Incels to members of the white, middle-classes who had lost income, status and privilege, who took on board its view of a world turned upside-down and driven by powerful hidden forces. While these simulations have had far reaching real-world effects, the truism that what happens in reality would be considered too bizarre to pass as a movie script is surely the case today. Imagine in 2008 trying to pass a script where a female candidate for Presidency is accused of heading a Satan-worshipping paedophile ring that has infiltrated government, business and the media and operates from the basement of a New York pizza parlour, kidnapping infants to harvest their organs, against which a billionaire property developer is waging a noble secret war? Simulation and the loss of the real is of course the territory of Jean Baudrillard, whose *Simulacra and Simulations* appears fleetingly in *The Matrix*.²¹⁴ Given reversibility is a constant theme in Baudrillard's work, from life to death, presence to absence, negativity to positivity and so this seems prescient given the astounding reversals before us today, from perpetrator to victim, friend to enemy, truth to post-truth and democracy to autocracy.

While discussion of the current ills that beset what passes for social order today is already the topic of several books, the "culture wars" deserve mention if only because prominent post-structuralists are implicated. In a message addressed largely to the American humanities Bruno Latour (2004), hardly a post-structuralist, argued that critical studies of

²¹⁴ This happens early on when Neo stuffs his illegal software into a hollowed out copy of the book.

science had been mobilised by powerful vested interests as leverage to foster distrust and to foment division and doubt in public opinion on global warming and other crucial matters of fact. He mentions an American Republican strategist who argued in the face of the virtually overwhelming scientific consensus over global warming, the need to make *the lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue.²¹⁵ Latour worried because his own project sought to identify ideology and lack of certainty in scientific research so as, ‘to emancipate the populace from, prematurely naturalized objectified facts’²¹⁶. He now questions whether he was foolish to do so given that there seems now to be a general distrust of all facts that are assumed to be ideologically biased. He distinguishes between two approaches, the first of which corresponds to his early work which sought to reveal the prejudices that serve particular interests that lie behind the facts. A second approach, which he now believes to be crucially important is to defend the real facts that exist behind such interests,

And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives (Latour, 2004: 227).

Latour points to the complicity of Baudrillard, Foucault and by implication Derrida in the above, singling out Baudrillard for suggesting that the Twin Towers collapsed under the ‘utter nihilism inherent in capitalism’, asking, ‘What has become of critique when a book that claims no plane ever crashed into the Pentagon can be a bestseller?’²¹⁷. Latour is right to argue that such statements feed into a post-truth discourse that signals, ‘an apparent crisis in which truth no longer has any authority to determine people’s beliefs or judgements’ (D’Ancona 2017, 7–8; Higgins 2016, 9). Latour also singles out Bourdieu (again hardly a poststructuralist) for comparison with conspiracy theory,

In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete illusion of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation’.²¹⁸

While there may be some form of relation in structure, it is important to note that conspiracy theory is motivated by identification not rational disputation; theorists make crass generalizations, employ false equivalences, tell outright lies, state positions rather than develop reasoned arguments and are allergic to considering anything that goes

²¹⁵ Italics in original.

²¹⁶ Latour, (2004), 227.

²¹⁷ Ibid.: 228.

²¹⁸ Ibid.: 229.

against the grain of their position.²¹⁹ By comparison at its best, science is reflexive, motivated by the principal of doubt such that findings and interpretations are subjected to rigorous evaluation and open to disputation and re-interpretation or rejection in light of new evidence. A good example of this is the relatively recent controversy over the lack of replication of results on priming effects in behavioural psychology.²²⁰ Streams of research across the sciences, from geology, to geography, meteorology and oceanography, all add support to the evidence base that predicts the calamitous effect of human-produced greenhouse gases have on global warming and on human life. In the face of this conspiracy theorists simply ignore the evidence and repeat the lie. One wonders what their explanation will be in 2050?

Latour elaborates on his second argument that the current emphasis on debunking matters of fact should be replaced by a positive focus on matters of concern, asking, 'Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who adds reality to matters of fact and not subtract reality?' (232)

From the above, it strikes me that there are two conversations between the academy and civil discourse that run along parallel tracks but cross only occasionally. In the conversation between critical academics, Latour's reasoned argument for a more constructive discussion is conducted amicably, whilst on the other side of the tracks, the most preposterous lies masquerade as truth. Does it really matter a damn in this second sense that Foucault, Derrida, Latour and generally Baudrillard would have been upset by the misappropriation of their arguments? For these or at least a pastiche of them has long since spilled out beyond the confines of the academy into an increasingly uncivil and unruly society. This is not surprising when one figures that just 8% of Americans had college degrees in 1960, rising to over 30% by 2022 and roughly 37% today,²²¹ of which a sizeable proportion took liberal arts degrees. It is unsurprising that alongside media representations in *The Matrix* and elsewhere divergent interpretations of these theories has since gained widespread circulation in the mainstream, amplified by social media and

²¹⁹ For instance, a dangerous lie peddled amongst others by Elon Musk and American Vice-President JD Vance, is that the UK has jailed thousands of "free speech" activists compared to Russia, which jailed just four hundred. As revealed by investigators numbers were falsified (there were not thousands involved in the UK but hundreds); the equivalence was false (In the UK one can be jailed for violent threats against those of a different ethnicity or gender; in Russia one can be jailed for promoting homosexuality, speaking against the war in Ukraine, or speaking against the State. Harford, T. (2025). *More or less*, BBC Radio 4, 19th March. In general terms pertaining to freedom, in 2025 Freedom House, a US based independent body scored the UK 92, against 12 for the Russian Federation and -1 for Russian Occupied Ukraine. The USA scored 84.

²²⁰ Maxwell, S.E.; M.Y. Lau & G.S. Howard, (2015). Is Psychology Suffering From a Replication Crisis? What Does "Failure to Replicate" Really Mean? *American Psychologist*, vol. 70(6): 487-498. See also email from Daniel Kahneman to colleagues. https://www.nature.com/news/polopoly_fs/7.6716.1349271308!/suppinfoFile/Kahneman%20Letter.pdf

²²¹ Statista, (2025). *Educational attainment distribution in the United States from 1960 to 2022*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/184260/educational-attainment-in-the-us/>

weaponised by those who turn them to their advantage.²²² When Latour asks has *Discipline and Punish* become bedtime reading of those at the US National Security Agency, he has a point!²²³ By this point in time, one might suggest, the genie is well and truly out of the bottle, the cat out of the bag, the fox out of the hole and it is too late to stop the rot.

Lacan was a towering presence, not only in his own mind, influencing the direction taken by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, post-structuralists who, if their obituaries are anything to go by, have become equally, if not more famous than their predecessor. Post-structuralists are, or were, disruptors of social order, whose aim was to break the carapace of harmony and order of structuralist theory, by questioning its basic assumptions. One of the most central of these is that cultural order is maintained through the operation of a regular system of binary oppositions implicit in language that provide social stability and meaning and identity for individuals. Most provocatively Jacques Derrida questioned the very basis of the famous dictum from John, “In the beginning was the Word” to argue from de Saussure, that difference is primary, given that the meaning of a signifier can only be located in the system of differences comprising the language system. By means of the neologism *différance*, Derrida argued that all meaning is ultimately indeterminate and uncertain in being constantly deferred. This idea owes its provenance to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who had also argued that desire is not simply an individual relation between a subject and the object of desire but rather is a social relation.

Derrida demonstrated the power inscribed in logocentrism which consistently privileges one term of a binary opposition over another; of mental ideas over writing; of phallogocentrism, a discourse that consistently privileges the male over the female; and finally, carnophallogocentrism, which summons attention to what he believed to be the most pernicious boundary erected between humans and those others we corral under the blanket term “animal”. Those who proclaim identity politics turn Derrida around because his aim was first and foremost concerned with developing an ethics of responsibility as opposed to a baleful rhetoric of blame. The irony is that because of his acute awareness of the antagonism it creates, his entire project was based on deconstructing the very notion of identity.

Derrida was a profoundly moral thinker who sought to show how power operates through language in an unquestioned way to elevate some above others who are objectified. In place of identity he sought out an impossible position beyond labels, describing himself as neither human nor animal but as an “animot”, to argue the importance of attending to the singularity of the one we have before us, whether this is a person, or the cat that shared his space. The artist Patricia Piccinini perhaps best realises Derrida’s vision of the animot through her fleshly hybrid creations. By raising the “question of the animal”

²²² 38% of the one million associate degrees gained in 2021-2022 took liberal arts and 11% business, while liberal arts did not feature in the two million bachelor’s degrees awarded business accounted for 19% and social science and history 7%. National Center for Education Statistics, (2025). *Most common undergraduate fields of study 2021-2022*. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=37>

²²³ Latour, (2004: 228).

Derrida thus added a new dimension to a subject that had up until then been governed by utilitarian and deontological thinking.

Daniel Miller is annoyed by proponents of intersectionality and critical race theory, who claim the superiority of marginalised identities in the name of Foucault. He argues that the “pseudo-Foucault” they construct is the antithesis of the real Foucault, whose task was not to establish a game of victimhood and persecution but rather, to trace the genealogy of power. While acknowledging Foucault’s capacity for subversion, Miller (2020) points out in a splenetic retort that Foucault never argued that women, people of colour or of trans-identifying activists who have suffered historically under the boot of white male chauvinism should be lauded, or indeed that the successors of the privileged should be pilloried. Miller notes that where the real Foucault adopted a neutral stance by analysing how the categorisation and labelling of perverse identities enhanced the power of the emergent profession of psychiatry, the pseudo-Foucault in contrast employs discourse as a strategy of power.

A student of Althusser, rather than subsuming politics, religion, education and so on into a global ideology associated with a state apparatus, Foucault employed the more mobile and decentralised concept of discourse to argue that power is imbricated in medical, psychiatric, penal and neoliberal discourses amongst many others. Like Foucault did not theorise racial or gender identities as given by nature but as constructed by power. For instance in the *History of Sexuality* (1978) he mentions that the notion of a fixed stable (totalised) identity of the homosexual was first developed by psychiatrists in the early modern period and that such explanations enabled psychiatrists to extend their power over criminologists in the court system and over the bodies of those whom they diagnosed. Contrary to those today who seek to develop an identity politics Foucault was suspicious of any identity which claims that it is authentic and which seeks to fill the totality of the individual.

How does Foucault’s conception of the subject compare with the Lacanian subject? Given that this question was explored by Judith Butler in “Between Freud and Foucault”, the following is partly indebted to that. As mentioned earlier, the Lacanian subject comes into being through identification with the Name-of-the-Father and installation of the ego-ideal which, creates a new tier of self-awareness that enables reflection on the self as an object. By means of this identification the subject is produced at the cost of the repression of forbidden pleasures which henceforth proliferate through the activity of unconscious processes. The Lacanian subject is never fully constituted by the law because of the persistence of this psychic remainder that continues to resist normalization, although it lacks the means to re-articulate the symbolic demand by which the subject is constituted (89, 96-97).

Foucault emphasised the idea of productivity in the formation of the subject that is brought into being and produced by the law. Similar to Lacan he does not conceive of power as an external force that presses down on a pre-given individual but rather through subjectivation, the subject comes into being and is simultaneously subjected to power. Discourses that furnish identities such as “Catholic”, “pupil”, “prisoner”, “patient” or “homosexual”, are totalising in their aim to construct and to fill their subject according to

the prescribed model.²²⁴ Foucault reverses the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas' depiction of the soul as a prisoner chained to the body, to argue instead that the body is the prisoner of a "soul" constructed by discourse, whose primary effects are on the body whose excesses must be reined-in and shaped to conform to the image of the model.

A major difference between Foucault and Lacan is that the latter's concepts of Imaginary, Real, jouissance and object a are entirely missing. Butler describes Foucault's conception of the "soul" as a psychic identity that, "constitutes a more profound captivity than that of enclosure within the physical walls of the prison" (Butler, 197: 83-84). She interrogates Foucault's argument for the docility of the body in *Discipline and Punish*, whereby the "soul" acts as a normative ideal according to which the body is "produced" and "stamped through power", trained, shaped and invested according to an "historically specific" imaginary ideal. She mentions that Foucault once stated that it is only through the destruction and disappearance of the body that the "dissociated unity" of the subject comes into being (90). While I can appreciate that the aim of culture is to make the body docile or receptive to its demands, from a psychoanalytic view it also makes the body intelligible. One can also appreciate that a fundamental dimension of experience is lost as the relation to the body is no longer direct or Imaginary but Symbolic, but to my mind it seems to be going a bit too far to say that the body is destroyed.

Foucault's account differs markedly from Lacan in relation to resistance. Butler questions the Lacanian conception of resistance as that which can undermine symbolic authority but which lacks the ability to re-articulate the symbolic law that constitutes the subject (Butler, 1997: 88-89). While acknowledging that there are "elements in Foucault" of something approaching this explanation, where a bodily remainder persists in the form of an absence or "constitutive loss" that might return as a "non-normalizable wildness" (92), she accepts that Foucault mostly conceptualizes resistance as an effect of power that subverts itself. This occurs because the subject is never fully produced in its totality but on multiple occasions. Butler describes for instance how "exhausting" it is for the "out" homosexual to constantly fend off demands from friends and foes alike that, "you are that and only that" (93). These repeated attempts to produce the totalised subject allow for the possibility of repetitions that fail to realise their aim and instead lead to the creation of a "reverse discourse". It is from this that the subject gains its 'inadvertently enabling' power.

In Foucault's later work there is no resistance that is outside the law, resistance which arises as an effect of the very power it seeks to oppose. Where Lacan attributes power to the symbolic domain and resistance to the imaginary, for Foucault the symbolic realm consists of relations of power and resistance as an effect of power, such that the symbolic produces the possibilities for its own subversion (99). The symbolic realm theorised by Lacan is monolithic by comparison with Foucault's conception of power as multiform, sinuous and conflictual, where the law can undo itself through resignification and subjectively is continuously rearticulated and remade, where the, "dependency of the subject on reiteration for coherence may constitute the subject's incoherence". (99).

²²⁴ The process seems obvious when one admits that one is not a "pupil" before one goes to school, nor is one a "prisoner" before one is incarcerated, although one may very well be constituted as a Catholic a few days after birth.

Butler notes that in his later interviews Foucault drew attention to the response of the State to singular and injured identities, noting that the more specific the identity the more totalised it became as a result of the demand for specificity and that;

“Because for Foucault the disciplinary apparatus of the State operates through the totalised production of individuals and because the totalization of this individual extends the jurisdiction of the state (i.e. by transforming individuals into subjects of the state, Foucault will call for a remaking of subjectivity beyond the bounds of the juridical law” (100)

For Butler, taken this way, what is known as identity politics is produced by a state that can only recognize and grant rights to subjects that are totalised with respect to a particular identity (100). She refers to Foucault (1982), where he does not formulate resistance as the release of a repressed subjectivity, but for a radical response, involving the refusal to be constituted in this totalizing manner. Butler demurs, asking questioning the extent to which it will be easy to throw off the totalised identities linked to the disciplinary apparatus of the state?

From the above, discourses create the subjectivities they regulate and frame possibilities for resistance, as evidenced by the myriad schemes engaged in by those subjugated by power to evade it. Most relevant in relation to consumption is Foucault’s later work, where amongst others, he discussed the influence of the Chicago School economist Ernest Becker, in forging a neoliberal governmentality centred around a vision of the individual wedded to the logic of *homo economicus* who identifies as a commodity and as an entrepreneur of themselves. Becker illustrated his point with several examples, arguing for instance that education made good sense financially for people of colour, that parents who prudently invest in their children can rely on them in their own age and that criminal behaviour is responsive to manipulation of the costs and benefits involved. Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism based on Gary Becker’s conception of the subject as an agent who maximises their utility, acting as ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’. While later I discuss the case of “Sammy”, a learning-disabled individual who is presumed to possess the competency of *homo economicus*, others have since argued that Becker’s formulation of the neoliberal subject is too narrow and that the conception of the entrepreneur should be broadened to account for a multiplicity of relations, including for instance, the non-calculative “leap of faith” entered into by those who earn a precarious living in the creative industries (Christiaens, 2020).²²⁵

²²⁵ The notion of leap of faith seems convincing also in the legions of self-branded “personalities” and “influencers” that populate Instagram and Tiktok. One amongst tens of thousands, each is sustained to cling to their precarious situation by succumbing to the tantalising dream that they are special and will be the one who makes it. On the other side of the coin are the casualties; at time of writing the UK Labour Government declared the need to address a crisis where 8% of those of working age, many of them young, were on long term “incapacity” benefit

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Chapter Three: Power in the Academy

Introduction

What might Adam Smith have made of modern marketing theory? As Smith wrote long before his vision of the marketplace began to take shape, it is not surprising that he did not foresee the need for a theory of marketing. Alive to the gross inequities perpetuated by the mercantile system of his day, he prescribed the operation of the price mechanism spurred by competition between a myriad firms coupled with government regulation as the means to discipline merchants that profited at the consumer's expense. There is little doubt, given his comments on the power of the consumer, that he would have thought that in a competitive marketplace it would make sense for a firm to strive to serve the needs of its customers. What then might he have made of the development of a theory of marketing that takes for granted that questions pertaining to marketing and consumption should be viewed, not from the perspective of the customer, nor of society at large, but through the lens of the marketing manager in the firm?

Principles of economic liberalism, involving commitment to private property rights and freedom of choice for consumers are uncontroversial for the vast majority of academics who form the mainstream in marketing and consumer research, who despite recent reflection on this issue by some, continue to assume the viewpoint of business. While the naïve outsider might ask why, given consumption is the end of all production, is it that marketing does not operate from the perspective of the consumer, never mind why it exists in the first place, if markets operate so efficiently, it helps to have some idea of the peculiar way in which the academic study of the subject developed in the USA, particularly during the period of the Cold War that followed closely on the heels of the Second World War.

When one thinks about it, it seems obvious that the academic study of marketing would have developed from the perspective of the firm as, unlike the individual consumer who has neither the time nor the resources, firms have a vested interest in having their staff trained in the latest techniques, and possess the considerable resources to fund development and to sponsor research. While policy makers are likewise interested, the pockets of the state are not quite so deep as those of the corporate sector and in any event, those of the regulatory agencies have been almost sewn shut.

Power operates at different levels in the marketing academy within which the study of marketing is symbolically positioned close to the bottom rung on the ladder of management studies, which is in turn located at an equivalent point in relation to the social sciences. It thus comes as no surprise that like psychology, the academic study of marketing has sought to burnish its credentials by modelling itself on the image of the hard sciences. Conceptual developments do not just serve the purpose of better helping the firm to attune its offering to its customers. Given the traditional lowly status of

marketing, critiques of the ‘marketing myopia’ of businesses that are run by engineers, technologists, accountants, or sales managers, and developments such as the marketing concept and Service Dominant Logic not only emphasize the centrality of marketing ideas but lend ideological support to enable marketing managers to leverage their position in the ‘C-suite’.

A paradox should be noted in that, as universities have become corporatised, so their executives, who generally continued look down on their academic colleagues in marketing, have been happy to pay a veritable fortune to big-time consultancies for advice from fresh-faced individuals recently graduated from their own schools of marketing. Reflecting on a book that discusses the growing commercialization of universities, Maurice Holbrook drew attention to another aspect, which is the irony that the academic values espoused by those who subscribe to the Journal of Macromarketing have been ‘undermined by the marketing ethos itself’ as it has progressively infiltrated the halls of academe, where some, ‘fairly ugly results tend to ensue’. Marketing academics who are critical of marketing practice must now contend with the ‘customerisation’ of students²²⁶ and the fact that corporations are now a major source of finance for research.

Paradigmatic Dimensions

Kuhn’s (1970) concept of paradigm, is a useful tool to explore dimensions of the field of power that has been employed by several academics in marketing,²²⁷ as it helps facilitate one’s understanding of some of the key differences between mainstream, interpretive and critical perspectives. The approach builds on Burrell & Morgan (1979), who allot a theory to one of four paradigmatic groupings based on its location on two axes. The first axis differentiates mainstream and interpretive consumer research from critical accounts. The mainstream assumes that the capitalist marketplace is harmonious and beneficial for social welfare and confines itself to explaining consumer behaviour within this context, whilst critics focus on the marketplace as a source of inequality and conflict. The second axis, which concerns questions of objectivity and subjectivity, is formed by background assumptions concerning ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology.

Ontology: Realism-nominalism

Realists believe in the existence of a world that is external to our perception of it that is made up of tangible and relatively unchangeable structures. Nominalists on the other

²²⁶ Varman et al. (2011) used Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ as a frame to explore this. They mention in this context that their empirical study, ‘uncovers processes through which market subjectivity is fostered among students as they strive to become responsible, active, and entrepreneurial subjects’. I can’t resist stating that in my experience students have always been expected to be active and responsible! Perhaps I am wrong. Send comments on a postcard to ...

²²⁷The concept of paradigm has been used by Arndt (1986), Hunt (1991), Murray & Ozanne (1991), Goulding (1999) and Tadjewski (2014). Sheth et al. (1988) provide an alternative scheme which provides a good description of the historical development of mainstream consumer research but downplays on critical perspectives.

hand argue that the social world is constructed by our perceptions, has no real structure and is made up of no more than names given by culture.

Epistemology: Positivism-anti-positivism

Positivism is associated with Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume. Positivism is anti-theological and anti-metaphysical. This is the approach which traditionally dominates the natural sciences. Positivism focuses on observation and experience and seeks to explain or to predict what happens in the external world by detecting regularities and causal relationships between elements. Anti-positivists on the other hand see the social world as relativistic and argue that actions can only be understood within the perspective of the participant.

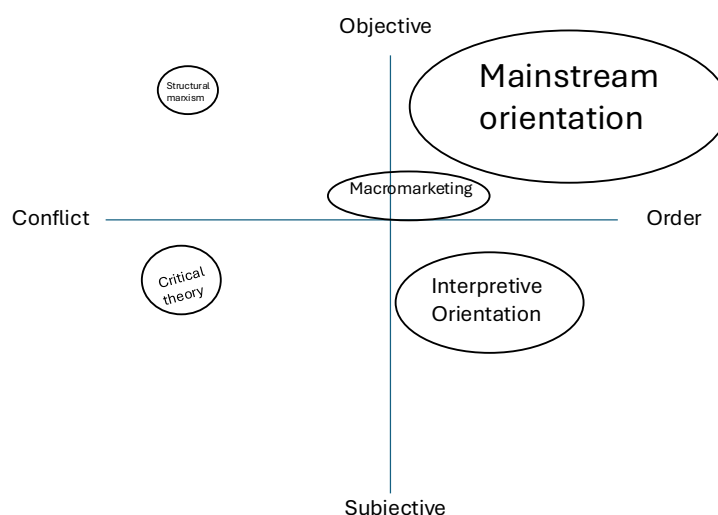
View of Human Nature: Determinism-voluntarism

Sometimes also known as the structure-agency debate. Are human actions and identities structured and determined by culture and the environment, or are we autonomous and capable of free-will?

Methodology: Ideographic-nomothetic

The ideographic argument rejects the idea that one can understand the social world from the perspective of an impersonal observer and insists that this can only be obtained through first-hand personal knowledge. This stresses a focus on case-histories and getting 'inside' situations. Ideographic theorists do not assume that constructs have one obvious meaning but rather can signify different meanings depending on their relation to other constructs within an individual's construct system (Kelly, 1955). Two individuals might belong to Extinction Rebellion because they each value sustainability, but when this is probed by the researcher "sustainable" proves to hold very different meanings for each. In contrast, the nomothetic approach is systematic and employs the same methods as the natural sciences, such as experimental designs.

Figure 3.1: Marketing Paradigms



The different paradigms in academic marketing are schematically illustrated in Figure 3.1. Although the mainstream is dominant, it is important to recognize the existence of alternative voices in marketing and consumer research. While mainstream marketing and consumer research is modelled on the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences, alternatives tend to be based on knowledge of social or critical theory and the employment of interpretive methods. A solid grounding in statistics and mathematical modelling stands the mainstream researcher in good stead offering them access to the top journals from which the critical researcher, whose academic capital is derived from their understanding and deployment of otherwise abstruse theories and concepts, is usually denied access. That the academy is not a level playing field is partly because paradigmatic groupings are not just artificial theoretical entities but are living organisms formed by research communities. Given that relatively small groups form around specialisms, distinctive communal norms and camp loyalties cluster around the shared interests of those who attend the same conferences, forming friendships establishing mutual bonds of obligation by examining theses and reviewing the papers submitted by their peers. While benign relations can persist within a particular camp, there is no love lost between the two main camps comprising on the one hand the majority mainstream grouping dedicated to logical empiricism and the minority interpretive “community”. Despite the best intentions of editors, it is not unusual to hear a “mainstream” academic dismiss interpretive consumer research pejoratively as “woolly” and “unscientific” while from the other side references are made somewhat snidely to the theoretical superficiality of the mainstream and its, “Fast Moving Current Generalizations” (FMCGs), (Brownlie & Saren, 1995). In this context the persistence of “Consumer Culture Theory” as a continuing communal activity may owe more to a common shared antipathy of its adherents to the mainstream than to internal theoretical coherence.

Tribalism can lead to superficial engagement with the other side, leading to a simplistic rendering of assumptions and arguments that effectively reduce the other to a stereotypical caricature. For instance, Hunt (2001) complains about the frequent appellation of positivism by critics of the mainstream as a catch-all label to describe a narrow preoccupation with hypothesis driven research, involving experimental or questionnaire designs that fetishize causality, measurability and statistical validity at the expense of complexity, wholeness and richness of explanation. He argues that this is mistaken as the original positivists rejected causation because they viewed this as a metaphysical construct and were only realists to the extent that they regarded objects such as trees and rocks to have an existence that is independent of our minds. Elsewhere he describes six different understandings of realism (Hunt, 1991: 35).

Power in the Academy

Given that Robert Dahl, whose theory of power is discussed further in chapter six was concerned to understand the exercise of power in community politics, to what extent is it possible to apply key elements of his approach to the contexts of marketing and consumption? In his explanation power involves an overt contest between two

‘individuals’ A and B, each of whom draws selectively on bases of power in seeking to prevail over the other. Before addressing the most obvious question of the power of business relative to that of consumers, I wondered for a moment as to whether some academics might have better access to bases of power than do others? After all, mainstream academics ought generally to be better paid and to occupy more senior positions in their institutions than their critical colleagues because they ought to have access to a wider range of journals that are more prestigious. That said, the population of mainstream academics is larger, so perhaps it all evens out, and it is also important to bear in mind that even if it were the case that mainstream academics had better access to resources, one ought to avoid slipping into the fallacious assumption that those with more resources are necessarily more powerful than others. Nevertheless, I thought it interesting to conduct a brief illustrative exercise.

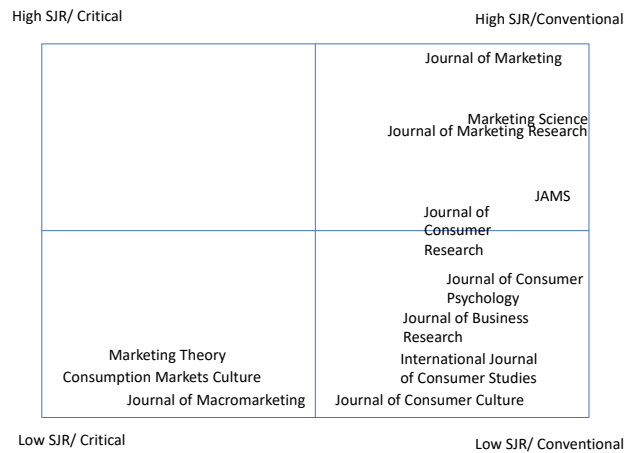
For academics working in research intensive universities, it is more than likely that hiring, promotion and salary advancement will be directly related to one’s perceived research impact. Writing over twenty years ago, Starbuck (2005) noted that even then, deans of business schools placed “extreme emphasis in so-called A journals” which led him to investigate whether the quality of papers published in these actually was any better than their more lowly counterparts.²²⁸ There are a variety of ways of measuring the impact of marketing journals, of which the most obvious is that employed by SCImago and Semantic Scholar based on the number of citations. Another approach is based on obtaining the opinions of a sample of members of the marketing community (Currie et al., 2023). While the rewards can be significant for those publishing in high-ranked journals conversely those publishing in lower-ranked journals can be penalised.²²⁹

While Kuhn’s concept of paradigm is useful in outlining differences, given that the vast majority of marketing academics are committed to the liberal idea of the market regulated by the price mechanism, one of the deepest divisions between them is not ideological but methodological, between those who adopt a rational instrumentalist, ‘hard’ science approach based on quantitative methods, and a minority who employ qualitative methods to explore the role of meaning, culture and identity in consumption. Another divergence is from the school of macromarketing which favours a more systemic approach to the subject.

²²⁸ The results of his study confirmed his initial hunch that it makes no sense to judge articles solely on the journals in which they appear.

²²⁹ See Appendix One for the Table of results.

Paradigmatic position and Journal Impact



From the above, mainstream marketing academics have greater access to a range of highly rated journals such as the *Journal of Marketing*, *Marketing Science* and *JMR*. Although it appears in the middle of the grid, a publication in the *Journal of Consumer Research* which is the premier journal in that field is an important step for tenure in the USA and accords status to those who publish in it from other countries. By comparison, avenues for critical scholarship provided by the *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Marketing Theory* and *Consumption, Markets, Culture* are in a different class.

The situation is complex as incentive structures differ from country to country. For instance in the UK, which is the home of *Marketing Theory* and of the current editorship of *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, it is not unusual for a critical academic to attain to the heights. However overall, as the Figure suggests the system is tilted towards rewarding the mainstream.²³⁰ Space is given over in chapter seven to discuss briefly how the loss of trust in academic self-policing in the neoliberal era and the institution of a system of metrics and citation analysis has led to claims of corruption and loss of confidence in research findings.

²³⁰ Substantial rewards can be gained from publishing, especially in top-flight journals. Although I couldn't locate a specific study of marketing and consumer research, one paper, which focused on a US Business School found that authors received increments of up 3.5% per article (Allen et al., 2016). Another rather dated study found that for those publishing in a top-rate finance journal the present value of an article was worth between \$19,000 and \$33,000 to the author (Swidler & Goldreyer, 1998). A more recent US study found that a highly cited article can increase salary from 2.8% to 8.9% (Faria & Mixon, 2021). Incentives have been reported to be particularly high in China where publication in a top-flight journal can yield a reward equivalent to one's average yearly salary while articles in top science journals can be up to twenty times that (Quan & Chen, 2017).

Mainstream Marketing

While the naïve outsider might ask why, given consumption is the end of all production, is it that marketing does not operate from the perspective of the consumer, never mind why it exists in the first place if markets operate so efficiently, it helps to have some idea of the peculiar way in which the academic study of the subject developed in the USA, particularly during the period of the Cold War that followed closely on the heels of the Second World War.

While historians and anthropologists have been at pains to point out that the roots of what we call marketing are not exclusive to one age nor to any one society, the USA achieved pre-eminence at centre of the academic field during the twentieth century through the establishment of business schools, teaching programmes and as the base for the leading journals. Although the history of consumption and marketing practices in other countries is becoming more widely known, the U.S.A. has for the past seventy years or so at least been the most widely studied consumer society which, through the medium of its powerful culture industries, has acted as a model for emulation for millions of aspiring consumers beyond its shores.²³¹

While it is pertinent to ask why it was that the USA and not Europe became the centre for the study of marketing and consumer research, this question can only be touched on here. A key dividing line seems to be the historical antipathy and contempt for trade that prevailed in the higher echelons of European society compared to its enthusiastic embrace by Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville, who had earlier commented that in his native France, “there is none so aristocratic as a contempt for money”,²³² later admitted on his visit to America in 1831, his astonishment to discover that its nascent democracy was not so much held together by classical republican bonds of civic virtue as by a shared belief in the pursuit of self-interest and the desire for money and wealth.²³³ Much more recently, the British management theorist Charles Handy also reported being struck

²³¹ As Rob Wills pointed out in a letter to the London Review of Books, (LRB 15th August 2024. Page 4), so-called “soft-power” can have a hard edge. He mentions the Blum-Byrnes Agreements of 1946 included as part of the agreement to ending French war debt to the USA, which stipulated that “local” French films could be shown for four weeks within each quarter with the remaining eight weeks being open to competition from American films. Wills notes that this was a great way of spreading “the American way of life” .

²³² De Tocqueville, A. (1961). *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Translated from the French by the translator of Napoleon’s Correspondence with King Joseph. With large Additions. In Two Volumes (London: Macmillan, 1861). Vol. 1. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-memoir-letters-and-remains-of-alexis-de-tocqueville-vol-1>

²³³ “I do not even know of a country where the love of money holds a greater place in the human heart and where a deeper contempt is professed for the theory of the permanent equality of property.... the majority lives in perpetual self-adoration; only foreigners or experience can bring certain truths to the ears of Americans.” De Tocqueville, A. (2012 [1835]). *Democracy in America*, Eduardo Nolla (ed). James T. Schleiffer (trans.) Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012). Vol. 1. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/democracy-in-america-english-edition-vol-1>

by the unparalleled appetite in the USA for novelty, innovation, growth and job creation, as compared to Europe.²³⁴

While business schools were established in the USA in the early twentieth century, such was the perceived grubbiness of trade, that it was only in 1964 that the British Government established business schools on the American model in Manchester and London,²³⁵ whilst the garrisons lodged beneath the dreaming spires of Oxford and Cambridge held out against the rabble until the 1990s. A similar scene prevailed in France where, as Pierre Bourdieu (1988) describes it, the fields of medicine, law and the arts stood as entrenched bastions of middle-class values that sought to maintain a virginal spirit of theoretical purity that embraced the philology, clear of the sciences and especially the relatively new social sciences of economics, politics, psychology and sociology, which being applied were judged theoretically impure (ibid.: 122). In this context, the field of business studies was especially marked out as an object for disdain for threefold reasons; as a newcomer, as applied, and as tainted by its association to trade. Consider then the position of marketing in the academy, suffering not only the slights and slurs adhering to business, but marked out within business studies relative to ‘respectable’ fields such as finance and organization because of its associations in the popular imagination to boosterism, trickery and sleight of hand.²³⁶

There are further questions, for instance, why mainstream marketing developed to consider exchange exclusively from the perspective of business, and why the dominant fraction of the mainstream sought to model itself on the “hard” natural sciences? Regarding the first question, it seems that the academic study of marketing in the USA might have taken a different path. For instance, Jones and Monieson (1990) describe the institutional approach developed by German trained economists from the University of Wisconsin in the early twentieth century. Wary of liberal market theory, they believed that the market is subject to distortion and inefficiency and were consequently interested to adopt the perspective of the policy maker to investigate the extent of consumer sovereignty. Their societal concern for equity and distributive justice has a long provenance, as testified by studies conducted amongst others, by Adam Smith and E.P. Thompson. For instance, in one study conducted in 1911 by Edward David Jones

²³⁴ Handy, Charles, (2001). Tocqueville revisited: The meaning of American prosperity. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2001/01/tocqueville-revisited-the-meaning-of-american-prosperity>

²³⁵ Hansard (1964) Business Schools, (London and Manchester Universities). HC Deb 11 May 1964 vol 695 cc38-43. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1964/may/11/business-schools-manchester-and-london>. Accessed 18th March 2021

²³⁶ The context is different in each country. In the USA for instance academics had to secure the academic integrity of the discipline against the practices of “street-smart” marketers. My understanding comes from an unpublished interview I did in 2004 with “guerrilla marketer” Orvel Ray Wilson who greeted me with the sneering words, “Hello DOCTOR”, making it clear how little he thought of academics! In my view it is understandable that there are very few references to “street smarts” in the academic literature, firstly because of their antipathy to the academic fraternity and anything that smells intellectual, and secondly because to mention “street smarts” involves summoning the bad old days of the peddling of patent medicines and so on.

reported that marketing activity in retailing was inefficient, adding fifty percent to costs, largely due to advertising and “an overabundance of retail stores”.²³⁷ Researchers also conducted studies of the dairy market and in particular into whether excessive margins were being made by powerful intermediaries in the supply-chain at the expense of farmers and final customers.²³⁸

Macromarketing, which focuses on the understanding of relationships between marketing and society also came to prominence from the turn of the twentieth century exerting a continual influence on the field until the 1950s.²³⁹ For instance, in one account from this perspective, “(m)arketing is not primarily a means for garnering profits for individuals. It is, in the larger, more vital sense, an economic instrument used to accomplish indispensable social ends.”²⁴⁰

While the academics at Wisconsin sought to adopt a disinterested view of the policy maker, Jones and Monieson (1990, 106-108) describe the development of an alternative approach based on neoclassical economics at the Graduate School of Business founded at Harvard in 1908 which was oriented from the start towards the needs of business and marketing management. Programmes were generally directed at students of economics or business and tended to adopt the aims and priorities of management, such that students were taught merchandising, pricing, advertising and distribution (Hunt & Goolsby, 1988: 40). Harvard thus played a central role in advocating the perspective of the firm and developing a bundle of techniques with which to educate a cadre of marketing managers who could fill the higher echelons of corporate America and by doing so no doubt, bring in some useful cash to the university coffers.

In what Wilkie and Moore (2006) describe as a ‘paradigm shift’ they date to around 1950, the focus of marketing moved definitively towards a professional managerial orientation. This shift solidified following publication in 1959 of critical reports by the Ford Corporation and the Carnegie Foundation which criticised business schools for admitting poor quality students, lacking qualified staff and in theoretical rigour. These reports had a chilling effect on research funding and led to a reconfiguration of management scholarship towards a more conservative model based on the natural sciences. An additional stimulus for this development was that at this time of the Cold War standoff with Russia linked to the “red scare” and fears of infiltration, quantitative methods were considered politically neutral and so safer to teach at a time of increased anxiety (Tadajewski, 2006a, 452). With the turn to a managerial focus the field of academic marketing grew rapidly from the 1950s as part as an overall increase in management education fuelled by large increases in MBA enrolments.²⁴¹

²³⁷ Jones & Monieson, (1990, 105)

²³⁸ See Tadajewski & Jones (2014) and Kavanagh (2014), for more detailed discussion.

²³⁹ Wilkie & Moore, (2006, 224),

²⁴⁰ Breyer, 1934, 132, in Wilikie & Moore, (2006, 225).

²⁴¹ Wilkie & Moore, (2006, 225).

For some of the above reasons mainstream marketing in the USA modelled itself on an especially narrow and constrictive vision of science by adopting a strictly realist, determinist, and nomothetic approach to its subject. Its core appeal was based on the pragmatic argument addressed to business that those firms which best serve the needs of customers will survive and thrive in the long run. The marketing concept was developed in the late 1950s, ostensibly because increased competition between firms at the time had led to growing recognition of the importance of a customer perspective. This argued that those firms thrive which better respond to their customers, by learning more about the formation of needs and how best to satisfy them. Hubbard et al. (2005) observed that from the 1950s to the 1990s, “every decade has witnessed some apparent progress in marketing’s development as a science yet paradoxically engenders more criticism that this rate of advance is not enough”. Given this, it is ironic that it was only in the 1990s, that attempts were made to operationalise and study the marketing concept.²⁴²

Marketing management sought to mould itself as a modern progressive enterprise that was different in kind to its wayward cousin, US ‘street-smart’ culture, whilst retaining on its fringe some of the latter’s evangelical elements. Keith (1960), and Bartels (1962, 1976)²⁴³ developed teleological schemes portraying a succession of ‘eras’ of marketing thought on an escalating ladder moving from a focus on production, to sales, and eventually to the holy grail of the marketing ‘revolution’, which placed the customer at the centre of all the firm’s activities. Mass consumption from the mid-1940s to the 1960s was fuelled by two related factors comprising an unprecedented boom in suburban house-ownership and the mass privatization of public spaces by suburban shopping centres geared towards mass consumption and profit maximisation (Cohen, 2003). While by then the marketing and advertising industries had grown in size and sophistication, the managerialist approach only truly came into its own at this time through increased expenditures on market research. The profile of marketing theory was raised by the proselytizing of ‘guru’s such as Peter Drucker (1958, 252), who modestly proclaimed that marketing was ‘perhaps the most advanced and certainly the most “scientific” of all functional business disciplines’, and Wendell Smith (1956), Neil Borden, (1964) and Theodore Levitt (1960), who introduced their students respectively, to concepts of, “product differentiation and market segmentation”, “the marketing mix’ and “marketing myopia’. However, it was through the development of the marketing concept, that the ideal of consumer sovereignty came to be enshrined as the centrepiece of managerialist marketing doctrine.

In developing the marketing concept McKitterick (1957) argued that the final customer should be considered as an end in themselves rather than as a means to profit. Why, one might wonder did he decide at this precise point in time to focus on putting consumer

²⁴² Kohli & Jaworski, (1990); Jaworski & Kohli, (1993).

²⁴³ There is a religious sensibility evident in Robert Bartels (1962: 10) linkage of the twentieth century development of marketing to the Revelation of St. John the Divine (Shaw, & Tamilla, 2001: 162).

needs first, when two centuries earlier, Adam Smith had suggested that this was so obviously a fact that there should scarcely be any need to spell it out? For if the consumer is sovereign then the firm should ideally have no long-term interest other than to act in the customer's interests. While Adam Smith conceived of a multitude of sellers vying for the custom of the consumer, McKitterick described a very different corporate landscape of oligopoly, where profit is 'a basic condition that must be satisfied'²⁴⁴ but where maintenance of market share is at least an equal, if not a primary goal.²⁴⁵ Given rapidly changing market conditions, he argued that working backwards from the end-user into the factory rather than from the production process forward to the user, would reduce dependence on production efficiency in favour of the required flexibility.

McKitterick (1957) was directly concerned with the issue of power, directing his argument at manufacturers who had tended to see their customer as the intermediary rather than the end-user. Given the oligopolistic situation he argued against price competition and in favour of research-led differentiation and new product development, noting with approval greatly increased expenditures on market research and a gradual shift in mindset that viewed the customer as an end rather than as a means to profit. Driven by an expanded workforce a decade after the end of the Second World War, whose incomes were rising, he noted the launch of a "flood" of new products to soak up discretionary income, 'on what would be better for the customer rather than cheaper'²⁴⁶. A cynic might suggest that in an increasing situation of oligopoly, product differentiation and segmentation also distracted attention from a degree of collusion involving "orderly marketing", or price-fixing, between rivals.

Theodore Levitt presented putative reasons for why McKitterick had been so exercised about putting customer needs first, by distinguishing the pursuit of short-run desire from long-term interest.²⁴⁷ Peter Drucker summarised this concern by stating, 'Value and service first, profit later. Maximising profit, perhaps never.'²⁴⁸ Levitt took a different tack to argue that firms, particularly those run by engineers, technologists, or sales people, could be motivated by a blind belief in the superiority of their technology, the excellence of their production process, or simply to get rid of products in order to maximise sales, rather than to ensure the long-run success of the enterprise by satisfying customer needs. Levitt introduced a moral dimension over and above McKitterick (op. cit.), to argue that short-term thinking is selfish and will ultimately have the consequence of threatening the survival of the enterprise. As well as the stick he also offered a carrot, that by implementing a system of self-regulation by disseminating a belief in the marketing

²⁴⁴ McKitterick, (1957: 29).

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁴⁷ Philip Kotler (1972) made the same distinction over a decade later.

²⁴⁸ Drucker in Bialkowski (2000, p.3), from Uslay, Morgan & Sheth, (2008). The authors rightly seek to reinstate Drucker as one of the formative influences on the scope and direction of the subject.

concept throughout the organisation, the firm could fend off unwelcome intervention from the state.

Levitt also warned that marketing is no “do-gooder” treatise, but rather a “tough minded explanation, outline and example of how to serve yourself by serving the customer better” (Levitt, 1962: 8). Years later those closer to the street-smarts derided as ‘marketing perverts’ those they labelled “customer worshippers’ by straying too far onto the side of the customer without attending to the competition.²⁴⁹ Jagdish Sheth and David Gardner (1982) described marketing as a subset of economics where the producer (whom they call the marketer) is the initiator, not the consumer. The role of market research in this context is more akin to the fisherman than the marine biologist, by seeking to understand consumer behaviour the better to influence and control it with greater effectiveness.²⁵⁰

The Mainstream focus on Power

Two discourses arose in relation to power within the mainstream of marketing thought. Most ostensibly a literature developed to investigate power relations between actors in the supply chain. There also developed a wider discourse that centres on the power of marketing ideas. In relation to the former, authors had to sort out the role played by the customer in industrial markets, as the one who on the one hand is just one member of the channel organization, alongside manufacturers, distributors and retailers²⁵¹, while on the other, they are posited as the one whose overall satisfaction is the desired end of the combined activities of these other parties.²⁵² There were also calls for mutual dependency and away from a zero-sum understanding, as for instance, A may depend on B for technological knowhow, while B depends on A for marketing (Breier & Stern, 1969: 103). Bonoma (1976) asked for attention to the particular interactional system within which issues of trust, cooperation and conflict are placed. For example, in a unilateral system a strong source can impose its influence on a weak target, whereas parties to a transaction are more broadly equivalent in a mixed system.

The discussion of power in this rather narrow context was overshadowed by pressing threats to the discipline that quickly became apparent in the 1960s when marketing came under unprecedented attack.

The Trauma of the ‘Sixties

²⁴⁹ Quote is from Davidson & O'Reilly (1987). See also Ries and Trout (1985) on marketing warfare.

²⁵⁰ I included this quote from a paper I wrote back in the 1990s called ‘Marketing: The Split Subject’, but can’t for the life of me find it. Apologies therefore to the original author.

²⁵¹ E.g. March & Simon, (1958).

²⁵² Beier and Stern (1969), mention March and Simon (1958) in the former sense. Within marketing theory it was perhaps only with relationship marketing and service dominant logic that these two subject positions (customer as one element, customer as end) were reconciled as they theorise the customer as the producer of their own satisfaction.

Products played second fiddle in the portrayal of the 1960s in *Mad Men* to the men themselves, half-drunk in a fug of cigarette smoke and misogynists to a man, driven by the front of their pants, in a world where the only word a woman could utter was “yes”. While the products also got an occasional look-in when Don Draper could be bothered to look above his trousers, Andrew Cracknell’s book about real life in Madison Avenue at the time is replete with tales of legendary campaigns for brands as diverse as *Hathaway Shirts*, *Volkswagen*, *Avis*, *Xerox*, *Alka-Selzer* and *Braniff*, some long-forgotten, and some still with us. Advertising agencies such as Doyle, Dane and Bernbach and Ogilvy and Mather surfed the high wave of the postwar boom in consumption of cars and a range of products designed to fit out the new suburban homes, and business was so good that they each went public, in 1962 and 1966, respectively.

In the age-old way that pride comes before a fall, marketers in business and the academy were caught completely off-guard by the spread of the counterculture, when public sentiment toward business, particularly big business and marketing turned from benign acceptance, to increasingly vociferous critique of its power, concern about the damage caused by harmful products to the environment, and the callous exploitation of consumers. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith directly attacked the marketing concept arguing instead for the “revised sequence”, that firms create needs and wants. Rachel Carson offered a shocking description of the effects of DDT on the natural environment; Ralph Nader described the callousness of big business towards the customers it purported to serve; while in one book Vance Packard called attention to planned obsolescence and in another, he anticipated the findings of subsequent behavioural economists, by drawing attention to the limits of consumer decision making and the multifarious, hidden ways in which marketers influence consumers. Collectively these works influenced the growth of a movement to represent the interests of consumers and in the USA, the government responded by massively increasing their regulation of business.

Marketing academics responded with obvious dismay to the flurry of charges levelled against business. Some contrasted a long-run customer-orientation to the evils of adopting a selling orientation, or of being product, process, or cost-centred. Others argued that business should move closer to the customer, whilst others adopted a more belligerent tone. It was left to Peter Drucker to acknowledge that the rise of the consumer movement was shameful to marketing, that basically marketers had let their side down, that consumers saw manufacturers and marketers as people who simply could not be bothered to ascertain their needs and that there was a need to get back down to brass tacks and look at things from the consumers’ point of view.

The Societal Marketing Concept

Philip Kotler (1972) pleaded for restraint and understanding among marketers who were hostile to the rise of consumerism, arguing that it had come as a shock to all concerned. The nub of his explanation for the rise of consumerism hinged around interpretations of the marketing concept. In one paper he argued that while the business community had

got the hang of the *spirit* of the marketing concept and while it was espoused by senior managers, line managers didn't *practice* it faithfully. Kotler acknowledged social discontent, accepting that marketers had been hard on Ralph Nader and others, suggesting that their critique could be seen as being pro-marketing and beneficial to all parties because it helped balance the power of sellers. Kotler distinguished short-run consumer satisfaction of desire from long-run consumer welfare based on interests, producing a matrix that described four types of products; deficient products, that offer neither short nor long-term benefits; salutary products that have low immediate appeal but high long-term consumer benefit; pleasing products, which provide high immediate satisfaction but can cause social harm in the long-term, and desirable products that combine immediate satisfaction with long-run benefit. Kotler then argued that the marketing concept should be modified so that in addition to providing customer satisfaction and profitability, firms should act in the long run interests of consumers as the key to attaining long-run profitable volume. This meant that firms should focus on thinking of ways of reformulating products which 'though pleasing, were also harmful to consumers' long-run interests (for example tobacco which provides high immediate satisfaction but ultimately hurts consumers interests) such that they become more socially desirable.²⁵³

It is notable that Kotler raised the question of interests, given that assessment of real interests forms a key part of Steven Lukes' (2021) radical theory of power, which is discussed in chapter eight. In retrospect, Kotler certainly had the wind in his sails at that time as his paper on societal marketing was just one of a number, that came thick and fast, some with collaborators, on broadening the concept of marketing away from tangible goods, towards the marketing of ideas, people and organizations (Kotler & Levy, 1969), an idea subsequently developed in his call for social marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1972), and for the adoption of a more expansive, generic concept of marketing (Kotler, 1972). Kotler & Levy, (1971) had earlier advocated demarketing as a reaction to "overfull" demand in times of temporary shortage, "unselling" the Vietnam war, and treating the environment as if it were inexhaustible, and Kotler (1973, 43) then advocated "countermarketing" as a response to "unwholesome" demand for 'vice' products such as alcohol, cigarettes and drugs and on the other hand for 'conversional marketing' where the market dislikes the object.²⁵⁴ All in all, Kotler's response to the ferment of the 1960s was thus for more, not less, marketing.

Social Marketing

One year before presenting his argument for a societal marketing orientation, Kotler had collaborated with his colleague at Harvard Gerald Zaltman, to make an influential case for

²⁵³ Perhaps the chief executive officers of the tobacco companies were out that day and failed to get his message.

²⁵⁴ A fairly recent example of this is the decision made in 2018 by American sports retailer Dick's to stop selling assault-style weapons and raise the age to buy guns to 21, as a result of which 62 employees resigned. In 2020 the company further announced plans to stop selling firearms in half its stores.

social marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), which called for an expansion of marketing principles and technology to a range of social issues. The authors stressed that their article was playing catch-up with what was happening in practice, where marketing technology was being applied by charities, churches and government campaigns advancing social objectives such as reducing juvenile delinquency, warning of the dangers of smoking tobacco and highlighting the importance of wearing seatbelts when driving. One of the contributions made by Kotler and Zaltman was the need to think beyond advertising, to consider all elements of the marketing mix when constructing a campaign.²⁵⁵

Kotler's (1972) paper on the societal marketing concept stuck generally to the traditional understanding that the purview of marketing is market exchanges of goods and services between sellers and buyers. In contrast, the earlier paper by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) argued that social marketing can apply to every organization, whether economic or not. As Kotler pointed out in an earlier paper with Sidney Levy, "every organization performs marketing-like activities, whether or not they are recognized as such." (Kotler & Levy, 1969: 10). Referring to the "oft-cited article" by Kotler and Levy, Alan Andreasen noted that, 'it did not sit well with the marketing establishment... because marketing obviously only involved *markets* and this meant buying and selling'.²⁵⁶ Rather than restricting the application of marketing principles and technology to markets, Kotler and Levy argued that marketing should rather be thought of as principally involved with *transactions* and not just market transactions.

The generally accepted definition of social marketing was subsequently narrowed to describe the application of marketing technology to programmes that aim to influence the behaviour of the target audience in order to improve their personal and social welfare.²⁵⁷ In *Social Marketing: Influencing Behavior for Good*, as suggested in the title, Kotler and Lee (2014) are keen to differentiate social marketing from significations associated with "sales" and "manipulation" that persist in the public consciousness, describing the positive role of social marketing campaigns on a number of harms such as reducing tobacco use, wearing condoms in relation to HIV-Aids and wearing a bicycle helmet, to reducing guinea-worm.²⁵⁸

Consumer orientation remains key to social marketing as the consumer (and by extension, the citizen) is assumed to be self-seeking; 'The best way for me to get what I want is to convince you that it, or some configuration of it, or something that I am offering in exchange for it, is in your best interest.' (Hastings & Saren, 2003, 310). Authors recognize that this involves relations of power, in that the consumer must have the power to rationally understand what is being asked of them and to have the ability to reject the

²⁵⁵ Kotler & Zaltman, (1971, 10).

²⁵⁶ Andreasen, (2003: 294). Reference is markets refers to the argument by Luck, (1969).

²⁵⁷ Andreasen, (1994).

²⁵⁸ Kotler & Lee, (2014, 3).

offer. Hastings and Saren (ibid.) argue that a second strand that is built reflexively on the above evaluates the efficacy of applying theories developed in the commercial marketing context, such as exchange theory, to the context of social marketing. A third strand is concerned, 'with analysis of the social consequences of marketing policies, decisions and activities' (Lazer & Kelly 1973). This strand of social marketing has a critical edge (Hastings, 2009; Gordon, 2011), in that it can form the basis for a critique of the outcomes of the marketing actions of particular industries, for example by scrutinising the marketing of potentially harmful products such as tobacco and alcohol (Hastings & Saren, 2003: 313; Hassan et al. 2007; Hastings & Liberman, 2009). While the aim of this research is laudable, in their foundational article Kotler and Zaltman (1971) had already recognised the reality, that marketing technology can be employed by any organization, no matter for what purpose. The key question is, who decides what is in the consumer's interest and what constitutes social welfare?

In hindsight, it seems clear that at that time of the debate between marketing academics over social marketing, they were likely unaware of the contemporaneous agenda of neoliberals to radically extend the purview of the market by introducing quasi-markets into areas that were then directly funded by the state, in health, education, social care, welfare and prisons.²⁵⁹ By the 1980s, following the institution of the Reagan and Thatcher governments, marketing, whether social or not and economic neoliberalism seemed to fit like a hand into a glove. By the 1990s, by means of a story that has yet to be told, social marketing had relations with the neoliberal economic vision of the individual as entrepreneur of the self, and personal branding was born.²⁶⁰

Relationship Marketing

For a time in the 1990s a buzz arose around Relationship Marketing that developed initially within the context of business-to-business marketing, spreading subsequently to services marketing and beyond. For those in the USA Relationship Marketing may have had something of an exotic appeal in that it was developed by the Nordic School of who pinned the blame for poor marketing practice on a narrow focus by firms on manipulating the marketing mix. Some adopted a quasi-Marxist explanation by contending that this narrow focus resulted in a double alienation, firstly within firms, where organization members saw marketing as a specialist departmental function concerned with manipulating the marketing mix, rather than placing the marketing concept at the centre of its organization-wide ethos; and secondly, with the effect that the firm as a whole became distanced from its customer base.²⁶¹ Relationship marketing was then promoted as an antidote for this malaise, stressing the need to develop lasting relationships within firms and between the firm, its suppliers and its customer base.

Macromarketing

²⁵⁹ Bartlett & LeGrande, (1993).

²⁶⁰ See Peters, (1997), Lair et al. (2005) and Gorbatoev et al. (2018).

²⁶¹ Grönroos (1994).

Macromarketing which was mentioned briefly above is described as one of the key fields of marketing, alongside consumer behaviour, modelling and marketing-management/strategy (Hunt et al. 2020). Its threefold aims were summarised by Hunt (1981), as the study of marketing systems, the impact and consequences of marketing systems on society, and the impact and consequences of society on marketing systems (Layton, 2007). Given this focus, in 1981, senior macromarketers who were rather disenchanted by the managerialism and individualism of the mainstream founded the *Journal of Macromarketing* and the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* (JPPM), which continue to provide an open forum for discussion of issues from mainstream and critical perspectives (Hunt, 2021: 19). It is perhaps unsurprising that submissions to these journals can have a utopian flavour, given the injunction by George Fisk, the first editor of *Macromarketing*, that its task is to “save the world” (Fisk, 2006).

Power is central to the macromarketing debate around the question of the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP). Kilbourne et al. (1997) described the DSP as, “a belief structure that organizes the way people perceive and interpret the function of the world around them”...’so vaguely held that individuals are only vaguely aware of its underlying logic and the direction it gives to their behaviour.” (ibid.: 4). Motivated by concerns about environmental degradation, the authors decried the current marketing system as based on an unsustainable logic of ever-increasing economic growth and consumption. Moreover they contended that the DSP is pervasive, rooted in the liberal Enlightenment and manifest in neoclassical economics and politics, at the core of which lies a narrow, anthropocentric vision based on a misreading of Adam Smith. In this view marketing management elevates the satisfaction of individual wants and continuous economic growth as the highest values and a political system where the conception of negative freedom is reduced to the right to the unlimited acquisition of property, and the belief that technology will come to the rescue to solve problems created by unforeseen externalities.

In a number of papers authors who subscribed to a macromarketing orientation called for a shift from hyperconsumption to sustainable consumption. They suggested that the problem is not public awareness of environmental destruction, as even by the 1990s people were concerned about this. It was argued, rather optimistically some might think, that the scales would fall from the eyes of the public when the “relationship between technological, political and economic institutions and environmental deterioration” is made clear, when, “the change required to reach a desired state of sustainability will become more widely recognized and demanded.” (ibid.: 17). In response Dolan (2002) made the important point that in theorising the DSP, the authors could have better recognised the importance of culture. Schultz & Holbrook, (1999) also discussed the DSP, to argue that marketing strategy could be used to formulate alternative solutions based on the development of a mutual commons that will reverse the selfish exploitation of the planet’s scarce resources. They pointed to concrete examples such as the success of relatively small-scale collaborations between Merck & the government of Costa Rica and the establishment of the North American Redwoods commons (ibid.: 221).

Over subsequent years two relatively hard positions developed in the macromarketing literature between the Developmental School for whom the current marketing system is the solution to the question of sustainability and the Critical School, who see it as the problem (Mittelstaedt et al., 2014). To their credit, both of these Schools take global warming seriously as a threat to humanity and questions of sustainability as complex, comprising a “megatrend”, that simultaneously involves economic, political, cultural, philosophic and technological spheres of activity.

Those who locate themselves within the perspective of the Developmental School tend towards optimism by pointing to areas of progress engaged in by firms. On the other hand critics deploy explanations by Marx and Gramsci amongst others, to explain why the market/marketing system has been so slow to respond to the unfolding environmental crisis. For instance, a materialist explanation deriving from the later Marx contends that the economic base consisting of corporate capital essentially controls government policy (Schaefer & Crane, 2005). In contrast, McDonagh et al. (2018) draw on Gramsci’s more mobile concepts of hegemony and passive revolution to bolster their argument that a number of groups in civil society including consumers, have been co-opted by capital. Varey (2010) makes the clearest point for readers of the Journal,

Wrong thinking about life entrusts neo-liberal economics and capitalism to find the solution to how to live a better life. Wrong thinking in economics assumes humans as rational, selfish, maximizers. Wrong thinking in marketing uncritically takes the neoclassical market model and its neoliberal purpose. Transformative change is needed to combat and repair the degradation. For that we need to change our thinking about the problem and the means to the solution.

Dermoddy et al. (2021) struck a more optimistic tone by identifying new forms of ‘power-with’, or ‘people power’ emerging in the proliferation of novel forms of environmental activism through consumer and community networks that asked individuals to reappraise their perceptions of production, distribution and ownership and engage in re-use, repair and the purchase of pre-owned goods. This positive tone runs counter to a sense of powerlessness and lack of esteem linked to the lack of recognition that has been expressed by some macromarketing authors. Worried by the prospect that they might be having a conversation amongst themselves some have argued the need for macromarketing to connect with others beyond the discipline. George Fisk (2006) argued that policy makers in think-tanks, government and board rooms would benefit greatly from macromarketing insights, at the same time lamenting that macromarketing scholarship appears invisible even to fellow marketers (Fisk, 2006: 216). His call for political relevance was echoed by Mittelstaedt, et al. (2014) and by Prothero & McDonagh (2020), amongst others (Varey, 2010, 123). Given their knowledge of the threat posed to human existence by global heating, these authors are rightly concerned of the need for urgent action by policy makers and for crucial public support if the imminent threat to sustainable life posed by global heating is to be successfully confronted. While these authors have correctly identified the problem, which is a disconnect from spheres of influence involving think-tanks and related forms of political organisation, as is described further in chapter four, concern for such matters is now frequently disparaged in the public sphere as “Woke”; testifying to the fact that the space for political connection and

mobilisation has since been colonised by a very different message which emanates from a powerful and extensive international coalition of right-wing interests.

Service Dominant Logic

Just as the mainstream seemed to be on the brink of disappearing, Service Dominant Logic (SDL) sauntered into town in order to save the day. Service Dominant Logic, modestly described as, the most significant development in modern marketing thought',²⁶² is the term coined by Vargo and Lusch (2004) to badge their bid to refocus marketing away from a concern with value in exchange, to value in use. In doing so they seemed to be aiming to rid marketing of “stuff” altogether. While differences between use value and exchange value were also significant for Karl Marx, their explanation is quite different. Vargo and Lusch criticized the traditional assumption that marketing relates to discrete exchanges of tangible goods between separate agents where customers are thought of as operands, or inert targets for marketing campaigns and where value is created in manufacturing, from value in use, which conceives of the consumer as an operant, acting with agency and purpose to co-create their satisfaction, such that value is created only when a service is consumed. Following a rather patchy prelude for their argument, the authors outline and discuss eight fundamental propositions, which are summarized in Table One.

Problematically, the first, third and fourth propositions downgrade materiality in favour of the immaterial, arguing that matter is embodied with knowledge which is the source of all value and therefore, that marketing is ultimately about service provision.²⁶³ Additionally, it is argued firms must recognize that value is only realised in use and that the consumer plays a vital role in co-creating their satisfaction. In this understanding, the role of the supplier is to provide customers with the resources necessary to generate value.

Table 2: Service Dominant Logic: Fundamental Premises (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Proposition	Brief translation
FP ₁ : Application of skills and knowledge is the primary unit of exchange	Discussion ranges from gift-exchange (Mauss) to commodity exchange (Smith)

²⁶² Tregua et al., (2021). The authors note that V&L's paper had been cited 14,000 times by 2018. They also note, somewhat depressingly, the very few papers that challenged what to me is its seriously flawed logic and argument.

²⁶³ I find this statement curious, requiring further explanation. Think of your body. Does it make sense to say that your mind embodies your body? Perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that it *informs* it. A pertinent question is the extent to which knowledge (mind) separable from the body it informs? This is a subject for debate that the authors do not venture into. Campbell et al. (2013) highlighted the massive material infrastructure that is required for the provision of services, which today is obvious in the development of massive datacentres to support the Artificial Intelligence.

FP ₂ : Indirect exchange masks the fundamental unit of exchange	Bureaucracy & hierarchy lead to distantiation of workers from customers.
FP ₃ : Goods are distribution mechanisms for service provision	Matter is embodied with knowledge. The product is a means to an end not an end in itself.
FP ₄ : Knowledge is the fundamental source of competitive advantage	Knowledge, not physical goods are primary.
FP ₅ : All economies are service economies	Distance their explanation from Adam Smith who had a narrow concern with manufactured output.
FP ₆ : The customer is always a co-producer	Traditionally customer and producer were ideologically thought to be separated in order to maximize manufacturing efficiency. This denies that the consumer is always involved in the production of value.
FP ₇ : The enterprise can only make value propositions	Marketing inherited the view that value is embedded in goods during the manufacturing process. In contrast a service marketing view argues that value is created only when a good or service is consumed.
FP ₈ : A service-centred view is customer oriented and relational	In arguing for the inseparability of the one who offers and the consumer.

Proponents have argued that Service Dominant Logic is “inherently ethical” as it is an integrated theory that offers the means to resolve ethical tensions that would arise from a traditional exchange-oriented marketing orientation, which can result in friction arising between employees, stockholders and customers.²⁶⁴ For instance, co-creation of value presupposes a level of trust existing between business and customer. Additionally, by recognising that knowledge is a central aspect of competitive advantage, customers and service providers will be more transparent with each other.²⁶⁵

Before concluding this brief discussion of the mainstream I should note the parallel between social marketing and Service Dominant Logic, which in my view can each be described as developments of neoliberal marketing thought that parallel those in neoliberal economics. Although there is scant evidence of any direct link between neoliberal economists and these neoliberal marketing theories, they share in common an aspiration to extend the scope of the subject to realms well beyond the exchange of goods and services, and they each blur the boundary between producer and consumer by envisaging the latter as an entrepreneur, who co-produces and even co-creates value.

²⁶⁴ Abela & Murphy, (2008).

²⁶⁵ Abela & Murphy, (2008: 44).

Interpretive Marketing

By comparison to the mainstream ‘Quants’, those who associate within the interpretive camp have generally been drawn to understand the meaning of consumption, which is discussed further in relation to consumer research. At a more general level, a decades-long debate on the scientific status of marketing bubbled up in the exchange between Paul Anderson, who argued the case for interpretivism and Shelby Hunt, defender of logical empiricism.²⁶⁶ Anderson asserted that knowledge is relativistic, that rival paradigms are incommensurable, that observations are always theory-laden, that facts underdetermine theories, and that science cannot provide unbiased representations of the real world independent of theory. Hunt (1993) riposted that although there may be cultural differences in relation to colour, nonetheless, all humans recognize the same spectrum of colours; that paradigms may present different explanations of their subject matter, they are not rivals nor incommensurable in the sense that they make conflicting knowledge claims; that to assert that facts underdetermine theories ‘is not doomed by Hume’s problem of induction except by persons who misguidedly insist that one can never “know” without “knowing with certainty”’; finally, that human perception is basically veridical.²⁶⁷ Hunt differentiates objectivism from objectivity to argue that a fear of ethnocentrism should not deter the researcher from seeking the latter.

Such questions have since taken on a new significance in the age of social media and discourse on intersectionality, colonialism and Critical Race Theory. It is noteworthy that the topic of intersectionality was received relatively recently into the marketing pantheon (Uduehi et al., 2024) (although the omission to mention the paper by Peñaloza (1994) was somewhat puzzling). The cultural relativist argument that the world-view of each culture is different has since developed the argument based on recognition of identity, that only someone who has actually experienced racism, sexism, gender or class discrimination, or all of these, has the right to speak about these experiences. In this context it is deeply ironic that Jonathon Schroeder and Janet Borgerson (2015), who have done so much to summon attention to the ethics of visual representation,²⁶⁸ felt an ‘uneasy connection to Anita Sarkeesian who had received death threats following her appearance at the 2014 Game Developers Choice Awards. No strangers to controversy themselves, including pressure to abandon their research sexist and racist representations in advertising, following one encounter, Schroeder and Borgerson reported that, “we have never experienced such vile and continuously terrorising comments about our scholarly work, even though we know that feminist work remains inflammatory and threatening within the academy”.

²⁶⁶ See for example, Anderson, (1983; 1986); Hunt, (1990; 1993), Peter, (1992), Kavanagh, (1994).

²⁶⁷ Quotations above are from Hunt, (1993, 82-84).

²⁶⁸ See for instance, Schroeder & Borgerson, (2005); Borgerson & Schroeder, (2018).

Let a thousand flowers bloom?

Wilkie and Moore (2014) describe the launch of the two Macromarketing journals in the early 1980s as part of a more general trend when the number of research based journals in marketing doubled. In the heady days of the early 1990s, just as the majority veered off to explore the extent to which firms actually follow the marketing concept, a warmish reception was accorded on the fringes of the mainstream to articles on feminism, the body²⁶⁹. and even to postmodernism.²⁷⁰ Although some got their hopes up, these were pop-ups; as I see it this was a bit like when Sophie Dahl first featured as the first 'plus-size' model in *Vogue* and everyone thought the entire scene was changing, rather than as the prelude to her depiction in the subsequent notorious 'Opium' ad. Specialisation was further encouraged by formation of Special Interest Groups by the American Marketing Association, a development which, while offering benefits, had the effect of fragmenting the mainstream, to the extent that according to some its very existence was threatened.²⁷¹

Critical marketing

As the following is idiosyncratic, partial and biased, for a more balanced and more complete understanding I heartily recommend reading the summary of Critical Marketing in one or other of the excellent texts devoted to the topic.²⁷² However there is a difficulty in spotting the first work on Critical Marketing published in a marketing journal as there doesn't seem to be an agreed definition as to what is meant by "Critical". Although Dholakia (2012), sensibly argues that this is an impossible task, if "Critical" with a large C is understood to refer to the iconoclastic belief that marketing practices can work against the interests of consumers and of society at large, then it might be fair to say that there was a brief upsurge of critical arguments at the end of the 1980s during the phase of efforts to "rethink" marketing²⁷³. Critical marketing found an institutional base through the foundation of *Consumption Markets & Culture* in 1997, followed in close order, by *Marketing Theory* in 2001.

Shortly thereafter there appeared the volume edited by Saren et al. (2007) which professed the rather optimistic aim to define the field of Critical marketing. Given that academics are supposed to engage critically with their field of study, what exactly did "Critical" marketing entail? When seeking to define a field, the difficulty is that fields have

²⁶⁹ For instance, three great papers were published side by side in the International Journal of Research in Marketing, by Bristor & Fischer, (1994), Peñaloza, (1994) and Joy & Venkatesh, (1994). In particular Peñaloza, (1994) challenged prevalent beliefs about gender and raised issues that only surfaced over twenty years later.

²⁷⁰ Brown, (1993).

²⁷¹ Wilkie & Moore, (2006, 206). The authors note that there were 49 marketing-related journals in 1997.

²⁷² See for example Tadajewski & Brownlie, (2008, 9-19).

²⁷³ See for instance, Firat and Dholakia 1987; Murray and Ozanne, 1991, Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Murray et al., 1994 and Ozanne & Murray, 1995).

ostensible boundaries. The editors decide that “Critical marketers” are different from run of the mill academics in subscribing to, “one of a number of radical philosophers in seeking to make explicit certain ideologies and assumptions (ibid.: xviii). One might interject that this does not so much delimit the field as open the gates to include post-modernism, post-structuralism and feminism, which have little to do with the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory. When Critical Theory is mentioned in their volume this is hardly illuminating; Adorno is mentioned just three times in total, twice in relation to motivation research, whilst Marcuse is referred to just once and misleadingly as a “Marxist” by O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy (2007: 193).²⁷⁴ The volume strays further from the noble aim of its editors by including papers that have little relation to radical philosophy on topics such as consumer disadvantage, societal marketing and the marketing concept and sustainable marketing that could comfortably be accommodated within a mainstream compendium.²⁷⁵ The upshot was that there was not very much that was “Critical” material in this book.

Tadajewski and Brownlie (2009) sought to develop a provenance for critical Critical Marketing by suggesting there was a longstanding “critical” element in marketing ranging from arguments by the Frankfurt School to “promotional culture” (Lazersfeld, 1941) and the “consciousness industry” (Kline & Leiss, 1978; Leiss, 1978). A difficulty for me is that whilst most of the ‘Critical’ authors mentioned who wrote *about* marketing, were not *of* it, in they did not associate themselves as part of the marketing community. This has continued Secondly, whilst the concept of “culture industry” influenced these and other scholars such as Andrew Wernick (1991), there has been disagreement about core ideas expressed by the Frankfurt School; for instance, both William Leiss (1976) and Jean Baudrillard contested the idea that marketing imposes false needs on the individual.²⁷⁶ Third, virtually every Critical Marketing scholar for the past couple of decades has professed some form of allegiance to the work of Antonio Gramsci, which is read in particular ways.²⁷⁷

Tadajewski and Brownlie (2007) argue that following its older sibling, Critical Marketing might share with Critical Management Studies a commitment to theoretical pluralism, methodological pluralism and a non-performative stance. While the latter point is widely

²⁷⁴ Marcuse might be better described as fashioning his own theory based on a synthesis of Hegel, Freud, Marx and the Utopian philosophy of Ernest Bloch, seeing Marx’s theory as in need of constant revision (Kellner & Pierce, 2014).

²⁷⁵ Adorno is mentioned three times in the edited volume in relation to motivation research and Herbert Marcuse just once.

²⁷⁶ Some people can get sniffy when they spot a reference that is more than a couple of years old and especially fifty or more years old as irrelevant, as times have moved on. Reading over Leiss (1978) again just now reminds me that life can turn full circle. Leiss (1978) contrasted the ‘reified consciousness’ of those ideologues of early capitalism who presented the market as the universal application of a natural law that demanded obedience, with the gradual acceptance of government intervention and state-managed capitalism, which ‘made this reified consciousness obsolete’ (Leiss, 1978, 42).

²⁷⁷ Consider for instance, Thompson & Haytko, (1997); Murray, (2002); Holt, (2002); Nolan, (2002).

shared as we shall see others disagree with arguments for theoretical and methodological pluralism. They continue by asserting that boundaries for Critical Marketing require ontological denaturalization, epistemological reflexivity and a non-performative stance (Critical academics are suckers for long words). These are similar to the three elements mentioned by Horkheimer ([1937]; 1972)²⁷⁸ to differentiate critical science; that the researcher to be cognisant of hidden coercion and be wary of taken for granted views of how society is structured as neither natural nor inevitable; that research should be self-reflective by recognising that the researcher is part of the object domain they describe, and finally, that theories are 'reflectively acceptable', in that one should not be working for the enemy. In my view these are much more easily said than done and I discuss them further below.

For Saren et al. (2007), Critical Marketing is a broad church united by collective opposition to the narrow reductionism, piecemeal focus and stultifying uniformity of the mainstream. They conceive of an approach that is inclusive and vibrant, perhaps like a coat of many colours, a melting pot for the exchange of diverse ideas, or as the furnace within which new conceptions may be forged? Others fret that flirting with a ragtag army of hermeneuticists, feminists, post-structuralists and the like dilutes the essential sap of Critical Theory, worrying too that analogous to the role of Devil's Advocate, findings can be incorporated into and strengthen the subject of critique, the implication being that critical academics would be better off twiddling their thumbs and publishing nothing for fear of the possibility that their stunning insights might provide medicine to revive capitalism from its death throes.

For some distraction and amusement, I wondered whether there might be human correlates for conflicting tendencies between pluralism and purity: Gorbachev vs. Lenin? Mary-Robinson vs. Seán Mac Stíofáin? Geoffrey Howe vs. Margaret Thatcher? Jimmy Carter vs. Ronald Reagan? Benedict vs. Francis? The list betrays my hunch that what underlies these different positions can sometimes have as much to do with identity as with high-flown rationale and where there is identity, dissonance is not far behind.²⁷⁹ Given that many of those who describe themselves as critical academics who are not stirred to action by vicarious resentment are motivated by principle, or are simply contrarian, or both, calls to preserve the purity of a Critical marketing that never existed in the first place (Hetrick & Lozada, 1994; Bradshaw & Firat, 2012) can seem like herding cats, or whistling in the wind.

²⁷⁸ See Hetrick & Lozada (1994, 549) for reference.

²⁷⁹ Bradshaw and Firat (2007) refer to *The Cult of MacIntosh* by Belk and Tumbat (2005) to argue that the fourteen Mac users interviewed are examples of fetishism and reification - basically that these individuals had fallen for the Apple hype that MacIntosh is 'hip' and anti-capitalist to a degree as opposed to the staid conformity of Microsoft. For Bradshaw and Firat this fetishism of the object also involves the displacement of sentiment that should have been directed against the Market. Turning this back on the "Critical" marketer, what if their stance was also "purely" motivated by style and differentiation from their more staid counterparts? A different explanation of what is going on in both instances offered by Heath and Potter (2004) is that the fundamental dynamic at work in both situations is not cultural engineering from above but mimesis.

Given that Critical marketing is about ... critique, where the mainstream tends to make minor adjustments or to build on previous work, there is a tendency by critical theorists to tear down the work of others. For instance, Hetrick and Lozada (1994) critiqued the theoretical purity of the emancipatory scheme developed by Ozanne and Murray (1991) and warned against the practical consequence that it would be absorbed into the mainstream, while others might have argued that the authors ought to have been given a medal for making it into *JCR* in the first place.

That Brownlie et al. (1999) tip their cap to the Critical Management Studies as one of the chief inspirations for Rethinking Marketing is not surprising given the lowly status of the marketing subject. Bradshaw and Firat (2007) lament that management theorists seem to “do” criticality so much better, making a heartfelt plea for a pure ‘undiluted’ form of Critical Marketing based firmly on Marxist foundations that will blame capitalism and all its works for the failure of the Enlightenment project to create,

a social order that would enable all human beings to lead lives of dignity, equality and freedom to realize their independent wills and potentials to the fullest – and who think that the major reason for this failure may be the hegemony of certain interests based on capitalism’s class structure.

A noble yet utopian sentiment, some might think, which leaves unanswered weighty questions as to whether a human being can ever truly be independent, or of how to balance demands for freedom from those for equality, which removes the burden of original sin imposed by Christianity from the shoulders of the individual and instead lays the font of impurity before the door of capitalism, howsoever modulated. Leaning towards the radical humanism of the Frankfurt School, the authors discuss how over the years many have grown disillusioned with its focus on critique rather than on praxis. Arguing that the individual as consumer is alienated from their ‘true’ self,’ as they, ‘can only move from one market discourse to another’, the authors thus contend that this has nothing to do with their individual psychology, nor can one blame their emulative striving, but rather the engineering through mass culture.

There are resemblances and also an important difference between the above and the concept of the third dimension of power offered by Steven Lukes (2021), which is discussed further in chapter eight. The principal resemblance is that there is agreement that the willing compliance of the individual person to power is gained through the conscious or unconscious shaping of their very wants and desires. Another point of resemblance is the argument that the individual may become aware of such shaping by engaging in a reflexive process that enables them to reflect on their predicament and so release themselves from its vicelike grip. The literature on ‘Critical Marketing’ is replete with presumptions of an authentic self that is mystified and led astray through the wily charms of marketing, a self that must recognize its predicament if it is to emancipate itself (Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Hetrick & Lozada, 1999; Murray, 2002). However, where Critical marketing scholars, for all their talk of negative dialectics, are somewhat vague in specifying precisely how this authentic self might be constituted, Lukes scrupulously attends to the question of how to define authenticity, for instance, by considering and then ruling out identity in favour of real interests as the ground on which to base this

compelling but nebulous concept. I should mention at this point that Holt (2002) seems wary of claims made about purported claims made about cultural engineering and the emancipated reflexive self, for example by describing the cases of Don and Paul as ideals of reflexive awareness who nevertheless cannot grasp the fact that they are also consummate consumers. The world has since changed to such an extent that social media, which was a rarity back then, is now awash with conspiracy theorists who are certain that they have seen the truth as they have taken the red pill. A “pure” Critical marketer might respond that such individuals require education in negative dialectics; maybe some did!

When considered with respect to Lukes’ concern with real interests the situation seems clear-cut when one considers the plight of the workers who manufacture Macs, I-Phones and fast-fashion. For instance, Varman et al. (2015) argue that instances of market violence are plentiful “if and when we are ready to recognise them”, focusing in their study of the practices by Coca-Cola in a village in India. However, as discussed in chapters two and eight, ideology is not necessarily the preserve of those who are somehow duped by capitalism. Although critical theorists ask that researchers should be aware that they are complicit in constructing the reality they describe, instances of reflexivity are thin on the ground. Given its pervasiveness and how it informs the ‘rightness’ of one’s point of view, given that there is and always will be a lacuna involved in self-reflection and understanding, one might be sceptical of the ability of reflexivity to penetrate the veil with which we surround ourselves, to paraphrase Burns, it is perhaps only on a blue moon that we can step outside of the frame of our conventional understanding to see ourselves as others see us.

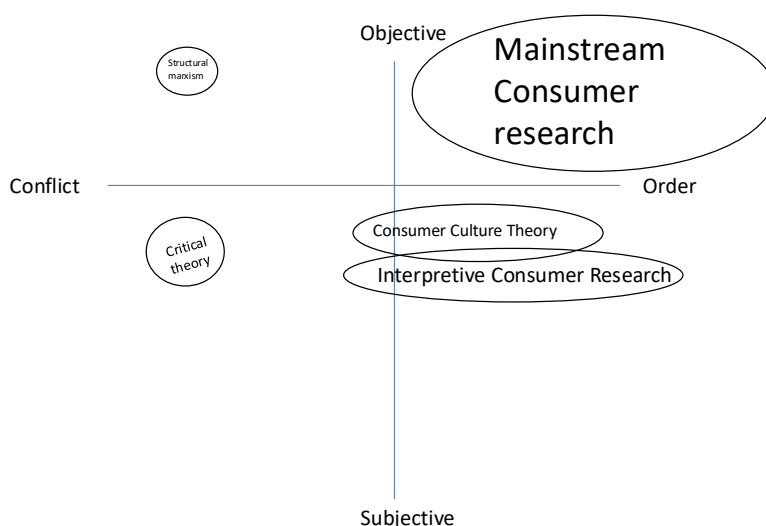
Critical marketers have expressed concern about the lack of impact of their ideas in relation to their peers in the social sciences and the wider public. Dholakia (2012) argued that social scientists tended to be dismissive of marketing because it is seen as, ‘non-critical, excessively micro, and compromised by corporate ideologies’. Having said, perhaps all is now changed, at least in the field of consumer research, given the appearance of a paper on consumption ideology in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (Schmitt et al., 2022). But then again.

Consumer Research

Consumer research did not develop in the USA as a neutral social science but in the context of management education, with the aim of conducting research relevant to the needs of managers. The primary aim of the preeminent *Journal of Consumer Research*, (JCR) established in 1971 was not to defend consumers from the wiles of marketers, nor to inform regulators, but rather to inform marketing managers of the latest techniques. Until the millennium most research published in the journal was functionalist from an

economic or psychological perspective.²⁸⁰ In a marked change of tone editor-in-waiting John Deighton wrote that since its inception, *JCR* had been marked by an idealism, “that takes the form of a principled wish not to be a marketing journal. Why? Because, apparently, that's been tried... it seems that *JCR* was born from the belief that to study consumption with fidelity it helps to be free of the prejudice that the consumer is a form of prey and the scholar an agent of the predators”.²⁸¹ Just two years later he rowed back on these commitments to acknowledge that *JCR*'s sponsors, together with most of its readers and patrons expected, “that its consumer insights are useful to marketing and the regulation of marketing”.²⁸² In this context one can better appreciate the forces ranged against Pettigrew (2001) in founding the *Journal of Research for Consumers*, which aims counterbalance the focus on helping marketers by producing a journal that assists consumers.

Figure 3.2 Paradigms in Consumer Research



Mainstream Consumer Research

A few years after it was founded, the scientific credentials of *JCR* were criticized by an insider who complained of the proliferation of definitions to describe similar aspects of behaviour together with a reliance on self-reports and on correlational studies rather than experimental designs (Jacoby, 1978). From that time onward there was a shift towards quantitative studies involving experimental designs and individual decision making. Until

²⁸⁰ Murray and Ozanne, (1991, 131) outline a paradigm structure where interpretivist and objective approaches fall on the side of “order”. They assign ethnomethods ethnography, hermeneutics, semiotics and literary criticism to the subjective dimension and cognitive psychology, role theory, structuralism, exchange theory and

²⁸¹ Deighton, (2005).

²⁸² Deighton, (2007).

the millennium most research published in *JCR* was deductive, hypothesis driven and quantitative, based on an experimental or questionnaire design coupled to a heavy focus on statistical analysis, with the overall aim of being relevant to the goals of management; an orientation still found in most standard texts on the subject. Dominant perspectives were borrowed from Rational Choice Theory that originated in microeconomics and the Information Processing (IP) approach in cognitive psychology which focused on attention, categorization, inference making, memory, attitude, affect and the role of heuristics and biases in choice behaviour. Perceived relevance to the marketing “practitioner” (i.e. manager) was an important concern; for instance one study that is typical of this approach was based on four experiments conducted with groups of US students to explore how context can affect consumer choices. The principal implication of the finding was that marketing practitioners could affect consumer preferences by manipulating the choice set of alternatives presented to the consumer (Dhar & Sherman, 1996).

Against the presumption that theory moves forward in a wave-like manner, evidence from a brief survey of *JCR* publications²⁸³ suggests a piecemeal movement, due in part to the variety of topics and the necessity to formulate precise questions. Given scientific scepticism, even the most common-sense presumptions must be tested. For example, one might presume that experts who know a lot about a set of products will have a narrower range of acceptable prices in mind than will novices, as indeed was confirmed.²⁸⁴ The focus on developing and testing models rather than propositions deriving from theoretical principles may also have contributed to a piecemeal approach. For instance, one fairly typical study sought to confirm the superiority of one price model over others using panel data.²⁸⁵ Others tested support for a particular explanation. One study²⁸⁶ concluded from a series of experiments that product experience cues are more accessible to processing than product information cues, providing support for the Accessibility-Diagnosticity model,²⁸⁷ which in turn supports Prospect Theory.²⁸⁸ Very occasionally, a study refutes previous research findings; for instance, the previously held general belief that brand promotions have a deleterious effect on brand loyalty²⁸⁹, such that mere possession of even a rebate coupon enhances a consumers' preference for that good.²⁹⁰

²⁸³ Conducted by the author. A spreadsheet of findings is available on request.

²⁸⁴ Source: Kalyanaram & Little (1994).

²⁸⁵ Source: Briesch et al., (1996).

²⁸⁶ Source: Park, Mothersbaugh & Feick (1994).

²⁸⁷ Source: & Lynch, (1988).

²⁸⁸ Source: Kahneman & Tversky, 1979,1982),

²⁸⁹ Source: Kotler & Armstrong, (1996)

²⁹⁰ Source: Sen & Johnson, (1997)

While one might have expected consumer researchers to defer to the arguments made by the powerful Chicago School of Economics, the countervailing influence of psychology was manifested in studies over the decades that slowly chiselled away some of the key tenets of Rational Choice Theory so beloved of neoliberal economists. Key assumptions were subjected to criticism, for instance, that consumers act as proactive individuals with foresight to maximize their enjoyment,²⁹¹ finding to the contrary, that they are often willing to sacrifice real time enjoyment for the sake of variety.²⁹² Authors arguing from a psychological perspective critiqued the economic view that price is a decision variable reflecting objective budgetary sacrifice, basing their argument on the finding that consumers often interpret price information in a biased manner.²⁹³ Some argued for a shift away from causal reasoning to one focused more on learning,²⁹⁴ whilst others espoused Constructive Choice Theory as an alternative to Rational Choice Theory.²⁹⁵ While most findings are incremental, the author of one paper contended that his study refuted theory going back over twenty years, by finding that accountability as typically defined has two psychologically independent and sometimes conflicting components.²⁹⁶ Others pointed out that there was a yawning gap in the overwhelming focus on rational thought, pointing to the need to understand the crucial role played by the emotions in evaluation and judgement.²⁹⁷

If this small sample is indicative of larger trends, then although there are signs of incremental change over time, perhaps because of its secondary, mongrel status, significant shifts in orientation do not seem to originate in the field of consumer research, but rather filter through from developments in the primary literatures in psychology and economics. For example, Prospect Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1979) has had a significant impact on consumer research with over one hundred and fifty references in *JCR*. On the other hand it took decades for the significance of non-conscious processing to be recognised. It was only after an opinion piece by John Bargh (2002) was published to argue that most decision making occurs without conscious judgement that similar articles began to appear in *JCR*.²⁹⁸ Indeed, an issue that deserves investigation is my feeling that for any major innovation, consumer researchers implicitly defer to those in

²⁹¹ Source: Arndt, (1986).

²⁹² Source: Ratner et al.(1999).

²⁹³ Source: Alba et al., (1999: 110).

²⁹⁴ Source: Van Osselaer & Alba, (2000)

²⁹⁵ Source: Allen, (2002).

²⁹⁶ Source: Simonson & Nowliss, (2000).

²⁹⁷ Source: Pham et al., (2001).

²⁹⁸ There is also a need to recognise the replication crisis in this area which has affected the credibility of some research. That said, there remains a large body of work that supports the operation of non-conscious processing and indeed of a dynamic unconscious.

other disciplines that have a higher status, by seeming to need the blessing of those on high in a 'core discipline' before they feel able to proceed.

Discussion

From the above very limited foray into the literature, one ventures to suggest one's suspicion that as an applied discipline, mainstream consumer research has tended to borrow its central concepts from the core disciplines of economics and psychology, which it is loath to part with until it is authorised by changes within the core discipline. In light of this it is not surprising that researchers who are informed by the same mindset as their counterparts in core disciplines have been similarly blinded to the limitations inherent to their approach. This mindset has led research to focus largely on samples that are unrepresentative of the human population. Henrich et al. (2010) describe the vast majority of behavioural research as WEIRD, drawing its subjects from an exclusive pool of westerners who are educated and from industrial, rich, democracies. This is deeply problematic, because WEIRD subjects are atypical of the human population as a whole. Richard Downey prefers MYOPIC (Materialist, Young, Self-Obsessed, Pleasure-Seeking, Isolated, Consumerist and Sedentary).²⁹⁹ In many JCR studies which used students as research fodder in exchange for course credit, the ethnocentric bias is such that authors did not bother to mention the country where the research was conducted but rather something along the lines of, "a mid-western university". Relatedly, although some scholars have sought to correct the historical focus on marketing in the USA by discussing developments in Europe and elsewhere, this still has a long way to go.

There are other problems yet to be fully identified. One rather obvious issue is the overwhelming focus on the individual rather than the study of inter-individual and group behaviour. Theoretically, this fits with the individualist idea of *homo economicus* and *homo psychologicus* and methodologically it is much easier to aggregate individual data to explain group behaviour than it is to study the intricacies of group interaction.

Another example of a group mindset which may have been influenced by a peculiarly US notion of individualism relates to the stubborn adherence to a model of the consumer as a rational information processor. Researchers marginalized the role played by non-conscious processes in decision making to focus instead on the minimal role of deliberate, effortful processes in decision-making (Bargh, 2002: 281). The information processing model was itself derived from the powerful metaphor that the mind operates like a serial computer, which remains pervasive today. Here conscious and unconscious thoughts and algorithms comprise the software that runs on the hardware of the brain. This understanding, which informs the accounts of evolutionary psychologists can also limit investigation, by forgetting that humans have bodies and are emotional beings.

There is little discussion in the literature of publication bias, or the extent to which there is a tendency to publish positive rather than negative findings. Given very few replications

²⁹⁹ From Culture and Cognition Reading Group. <https://cultureandcognitionreadinggroup.wordpress.com/2017/02/02/blog-post-title-3/> Accessed July 2019

are published it is difficult to challenge existing explanations and the majority of published papers either support or extend existing theory. It is noteworthy that in the field of psychology there has been a worrying lack of replication of some significant studies. Some caution that researchers should avoid making claims about effect sizes without considering the many causal factors that may influence these (Fern & Monroe, 1996).

A final question relates to the relevance of consumer research, or whether or not the scientific study of consumer behaviour feeds through into actual practice? In one study of the differences between practitioners, students and academics, Armstrong, (1991) first made predictions based on 105 hypotheses selected from studies published in JCR. Based on this he found that just over 58% of practitioners, just under 57% of students and about 51% of academics were correct and no group performed better than chance.

Interpretive Consumer Research

Given that the scientific status of marketing has been a matter of dispute for years, contested on the one hand by those advocating a realist and on the other hand, an interpretive ontology, one might assume from this that interpretive consumer research is on a par with the mainstream nomothetic orientation, when in fact it constitutes a small but active minority grouping.³⁰⁰ The story began in the 1930s and 1940s with the flight into the USA from Nazi Germany of the psychoanalytically informed researchers Paul Lazarsfeld and Ernest Dichter. Dichter (1960) criticized the widespread use of survey instruments commonly used at that time to gain insight into consumer motivations and instead used a variety of methods including observation and the construction of idiographic case histories based on depth interviews.³⁰¹ Sidney Levy who was also influenced by psychoanalysis was also amongst the first to critique the narrow focus on functionality and economic rationality that pervaded marketing thought in the 1950s. He argued in contrast that “*people buy things not only for what they can do, but for what they mean* (Levy, 1959: 118 – italics in original). Here Levy argues for a focus on understanding the social and personal symbolic meaning of goods and how these enhance a sense of self.

A similar argument was deployed many years later by Elizabeth Hirschman and Maurice Holbrook, (1982) in their critique of the dominant information processing explanation of consumer behaviour, arguing that portraying the consumer as an information processor or problem solver is too narrow, focusing too much on tangibles and insufficiently on symbolic meaning. Along with Levy their argument was to an extent influenced by psychoanalysis, for example when contending that the information processing perspective focuses overmuch on secondary rationalisations made by the consumer rather than on the unconscious primary process that seeks “fun, amusement, fantasy,

³⁰⁰ Maurice Holbrook and Elizabeth Hirschman managed to an extent to walk both sides of the street by publishing respectively, ten and six articles and book reviews in the Journal of Marketing; Russell Belk is listed for two.

³⁰¹ Motivation research played an influential role in the 1950s, enjoying many publications in the Journal of Marketing. See for example, Britt, 1950; Woodward et al., 1950; Blankertz, (1955) and Peters, (1957).

arousal, sensory stimulation, and enjoyment” (ibid.: 135). While advocating the need to understand the consumer’s subjective experience, they argued against the psychoanalytic focus on the unconscious to focus instead on the preconscious as the seat of symbolic meaning, on the ground that this is amenable to exploration by indirect methods (ibid.: 136). Moreover, ‘(t)his experiential perspective is phenomenological in spirit and regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings’. (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982: 132).

For the adventurous types who went on the consumer behaviour Odyssey, described by Belk (1991), while their experience seems more akin to *Easy Rider* than to the travails of Odysseus, their road trip, which sought to use naturalistic methods to understand consumer behaviour for its own sake rather than to glean implications for managers proved to be influential, providing detailed accounts that revealed the variety and richness of experience. While providing many valuable insights, the focus on interpretation was not only interesting because it provided richer insights into meaning and experiences of consumption; it was alluring too for some who considered themselves as unconventional mavericks, the rightful heirs of the hippies to take a stand against the staid conformity of their be-suited colleagues. This lent interpretivism a rebel air as the critical counterpart to a mainstream besotted with endless discussions over correlation, regression and structural equation modelling. However, as their rebellion was more about a rejection of conformity than engagement with radical critique, it carried overtones of what Heath and Potter (2004) describe in *The Rebel Sell*.

Interpretive researchers also sought to broaden the understanding of advertising reception beyond information processing by arguing that it is insufficient to consider this simply as a form of information transfer but as a process that is saturated by meaning. For instance, Mick and Buhl (1992) focused on three Danish brothers who each attributed very different meanings to advertising materials to argue meanings are actively constructed by the reader in relation to their personal history and lifeworld. Linda Scott argued that music (Scott, 1990) and images (Scott, 1994) which were widely assumed to elicit direct affective responses in consumers should better be understood as forms of language subject to cognitive evaluation. McQuarrie & Mick (1996; 2003) developed this idea by focusing on the rhetorical figures used in advertising and the cultural competence required to understand them. Ritson & Elliott (1999) criticized the focus on the solitary subject of advertising and drew attention to the social context of advertising. Jayasinghe & Ritson (2013) further explored the social context of television advertising by studying the discourse and practices of groups of viewers watching in the home.

In developing explanations of consumer behaviour based on the group as a unit of analysis researchers were confronted with the important question of what manifestation to focus on, be it sub-cultures, communities, counter-cultures, cults, tribes, or movements? Schouten and McAlexander (1995) popularized subculture as a term to describe the shared commitment to the brand expressed by members of Harley Davidson Owners’ Groups (HOGs). While their approach was similar to that used by the critically oriented Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hebdige, 1979; 1988), as

pointed out by Holt (1997), where Hebdige discussed how Mod and Rocker subcultures emerged from a common working-class culture, using a range of commodities and locations as symbolic markers of their respective identities, the focus of Schouten & McAlexander is largely voluntarist and individualistic, downplaying collective influences such as ethnicity, gender and social-class.

Sub-culture was criticized as too narrow to describe the full panoply of collective consumption activities as it envisages a subaltern group with a common identity (Kozinets, 2001). While there are overlaps, the term sub-culture was replaced by the looser construct of brand community, “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001: 4123). Brand communities have been described coalescing around brands such as Saabs and Apple Macs, (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), Harley Davidson (Fournier et al., 2001), Apple Newtons (O’Guinn & Schau, 2005) and European car clubs (Algesheimer, et al., 2005) to name a few. However, just as sub-culture can be inappropriate to describe leisure activities that lack the depth of a shared way of life (Kozinets, 2001), so brand community can be criticized for its exclusive focus on positive relations and its failure to grasp the essence of real community which involves a deeply ambivalent oscillation between love and hatred of others. Given its blandness it is unsurprising that brand community has jumped to the mainstream where it is reduced to a cipher as a variable to be manipulated by marketing management (Jensen-Schau et al., 2009).

Interpretive researchers developed consumer acculturation research as a group-based explanation of the role played by commodities in migrants’ assimilation to their host culture (Reilly & Wallendorf, 1987). Research has since indicated that assimilation is an inadequate term to describe the more complex and ambivalent process where migrants sometimes overidentify with aspects of the host culture or of their home culture. In one study Mexican immigrants to the USA quickly acquired the commodity symbols of their host country such as clothing and cars but consumed these in ways that conformed with their Mexican origin (Peñaloza 1994). Researchers have explored the experiences of those with low economic and cultural capital within the same country, describing the bleak prospect faced by young women in a Turkish squatter camp when their dreams of success in the consumer society crash in the wake of their brute realization that they lack of resources to achieve them (Üstüner and Holt 2007).

From the above, like their mainstream counterparts, interpretive researchers have sought to develop knowledge by supporting and extending the results gained from previous studies and by critiquing others. Whilst providing a rich description it can be difficult to generalize from research because of the need to attend to context. Noteworthy are those rare studies that focus on important topics, such as the role of political ideology in consumption, (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004), addiction (Hirschman, 1992), abortion (Patterson et al., 1995) and survivors of breast cancer (Pavia & Mason, 2004).

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

The moniker 'Consumer Culture Theory' is misleading because it is not so much a theory, as a retroactive attempt to construct of a theoretical umbrella by Arnould & Thompson, (2005) around a diverse group of interpretive consumer researchers and their topics. It is a brand that forms a circling of the wagons around an otherwise disparate group united by a common enemy, represented by the overwhelmingly quantitative, nomothetic approach characteristic of mainstream consumer research. CCT is discussed here for the simple reason that most of the papers published under its banner are interpretive. However, as is discussed further below, there has been considerable epistemological stretch since the publication of the foundational paper by Arnould and Thompson (2005). This paper, which signalled a definitive shift in interpretive consumer research was written at the instigation of Dawn Iacobucci the then editor of *JCR*, who was keen to extend the journal's diversity and provide legitimacy for interpretive research (Bode & Ostergaard, 2013; Dahl et al., 2015). Arnould and Thompson retroactively constructed four broad areas of CCT research relating to consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer's interpretive strategies, stressing that any one study may contain aspects of all four themes. The inauguration of the CCT brand was welcomed by many who subsequently attended its annual conferences and doctoral programmes although it was not greeted with universal approval, particularly from critical scholars. The creation of CCT presented an interrelated three-fold problem from the outset relating to theoretical coherence, the legitimacy of its endeavour and the maintenance of community.

Theoretical Coherence

By comparison to those in the mainstream, perhaps the most difficult problem for the aspiring interpretive researcher lies in orienting oneself to a theoretical landscape that is complex, dense and often arcane. While knowledge of Kuhn's (1970) paradigmatic scheme is not perfect, it provides the aspirant researcher with tools to gain some purchase on how to differentiate theories and to understand historical debates on the nature of marketing science (Tadajewski, 2008, 2014). Arnould and Thompson (2005) ignored the 1980s paradigmatic debate between interpretive and mainstream consumer researchers. This omission is understandable because Kuhn (1970) argues that paradigms are incommensurable, as theorists working from different paradigmatic bases apply different standards. In this understanding to group theorists from different orientations under a brand name that implies a singular movement risks conflict, as theorists dispute the terms of reference, leading to incoherence, when irresolvable conflicts arise pertaining to key assumptions.

To begin with, CCT aligned its outlook with interpretivism. In their foundational paper Arnould and Thompson (2005) acknowledge that interpretivism is central to the birth narrative of CCT, originating in the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey (Belk, 1991). However, they state that the brand name Consumer Culture *Theory* actually refers to a "family" of theories that share the aim of exploring "the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005: 868/869).

While there is mismatch between the contents (theories) and the brand name (theory) this description generally accords with an interpretivist orientation. However in a later paper the authors explained that the philosophical diversity in “this research tradition” is better described as consumer culture theoretics (Arnould & Thompson, 2007b). The terminology is changed and the scope further widened when they argue that heteroglossia is the most appropriate term to describe, “the intersecting, overlapping and at times, conflicting polydiscursive constitution of CCT (Thompson et al., 2013: 150).

The shifts in direction which stretched the epistemological base of CCT to breaking point were largely provoked in response to criticism, which, given that the mainstream remains placidly untroubled by CCT, has come largely from within its own ranks. One strand of critique argues that research on identity projects and consumer self-reports of their lived experiences is overly voluntaristic, painting too rosy a picture of the subject who is constructed by this discourse as a self-actualizing, autonomous agent, free of social conditioning. Critics also argued for the need to attend to how culture normalizes particular ways of self-understanding while marginalizing others (Moisander et al., 2009a) and questioned the ability of phenomenological interviews to address this (Moisander et al., 2009b). Askegaard and Linnet (2011) suggested a move away from a subjectivist epistemology to create a dialogue of “open reasoning”, between subjectivist and objectivist approaches to consumer research that acknowledges the limitations of sticking rigidly to either extreme. In their view this would enable the accommodation of a sociological frame of reference that situates these experiences within the structures of the market society in ways that “are not necessarily felt or experienced by consumers in their daily lives” (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011: 382). On the other hand in seeking to straddle two horses, the risk is that one falls between them.

CCT has been criticised for being ideological, promoting neoliberal values by accepting the given-ness of the market and ignoring power relations by accentuating the self-actualizing responsible individual consumer. Fitchett et al., (2014) complained that CCT acts a disciplinary device that stifles radical alternative movements (ibid. 399). Alongside the “cultural turn” they argue that CCT promotes neoliberal ideology by adopting an uncritical approach to the operation of the market as the optimum medium for resource allocation, proclaiming that individuals by acting in their own private self-interest, operate as the most efficient, just and legitimate basis for social and economic organization. From a paradigmatic perspective these authors view CCT from the radical view that society is conflicted, as it is riven by rival class interests. In contrast, in his reply to Fitchett, Askegaard (2014) adopted an integrationist stance, making the scarcely veiled comment that he could not understand how, given their trenchant critique of capitalism, some authors find work in business schools.

The above tensions within the CCT “community” help understand why its description by Arnould and Thompson has moved steadily towards disintegration, from a family of theories (Arnould & Thompson, 2007a), to theoretics (Arnould & Thompson, 2007b) and finally, heteroglossia (Arnould & Thompson, 2013). This latest explanation contended that the original epistemological orientation based on the experiential consumer had, “long

given way to a multilayered CCT heteroglossia that features a broad range of theorizations integrating structural and agentic levels of analysis” (Thompson et al. 2013: 149). Moreover, nowadays the “well integrated CCT researcher has a ready access to the supermarket shelves of ‘many ontological frameworks’ such as practice theories, cognitive anthropology, structuration theory, Foucauldian governmentality, and Butler’s performativity approach”. (Thompson et al., 2013: 159). Such diversity invites the criticism that in such a milieu the aspirant researcher will become a jack of all trades and master of none. Thompson and his co-authors seek to reassure those, “interpretive practices of less well versed, novice, and/or peripheral members of the CCT community, the CCT heteroglossia still encompasses the discursive legacy of its formative humanistic/experientialist genesis (and corresponding verificationist epistemology) (Thompson et al., 2013: 160). In this paper they do discuss paradigms, arguing that the paradigm debates of the 1980s were different to those from the early 1990s and shifted again in the wake of the formation of the CCT brand. Given the proliferation of theories and concepts it might be objected that heteroglossia is another way to describe the Tower of Babel.

Legitimacy

Pragmatism was central to the institution of CCT, as a means to improve the chances of success in the academic job market for interpretive researchers. The foundation of CCT was described in such terms by Arnould and Thompson (2005) as a move from research to realpolitik prompted by the failure of earlier interpretive researchers to secure its status in the marketing academy. They later proclaimed the success of CCT as “a recognized paradigmatic category” (Thompson, et al. 2013). The “Catch-22” is that when one is recognised by the mainstream, one can no longer be regarded as standing critically outside of it. Given that consumer research is not classed as a social science but as a management discipline, there is a related tension between pragmatism and idealism. Holbrook and Grayson (1986) ask what is more valuable, to work in the interests of marketing management or pursue consumer research for its own sake (Holbrook & Grayson, 1986: 380). More recently this is presented as the choice to work “on pure research, untainted by links to commerce or power structures of the academy” (Ostergaard & Bode, 2016: 392).

One of the main criticisms of CCT is that its legitimizing pretensions are antithetical to radical scholars who worry that their commitment to “groundbreaking, innovative, radical and sometimes even weird research” will be traded in for the accumulation of symbolic capital and academic respectability (Bode & Østergaard, 2013). There is a perhaps unsurmountable divide between those who wish to for a degree of integration and consensus in order to boost the symbolic capital of CCT and those for whom radical transformation is a primary concern (Fitchett et al., 2013; Cova et al. 2013). This is exacerbated by problem that as the originators of the concept Arnould and Thompson seem bound to defend it, acting not only as apologists but as legislators, thereby establishing a hierarchy.

Community

When evaluated in relation to the framework described by Burrell & Morgan (1979) the “family” relation of CCT is tenuous, as its members differ in fundamental ways, such that one member of the “family” is committed to exploring the positive role played by commodities in fulfilling consumers’ desires for meaning and identity, whilst another seeks the imminent demise of consumer capitalism, whilst a third is concerned with the poetic meaning of consumption. That said, research traditions are not so much defined by the publications that are their excreta but by the living community that determines what is interesting and worthwhile to research and publish. The interpretive community in consumer research, recognizing its dissidence from the US mainstream, was welcoming of others also considered oddballs (Bode & Østergaard, 2013). In the 1990s conferences organised by the ACR in Asia and Europe enabled the exchange of ideas, although these were tinged at times by a patronising colonial sensibility by those from the ‘home’ country. Towards the end of that decade open and vibrant exchanges occurred in three conferences that took place at St. Malachy’s Retreat Centre, Belfast, organised by Stephen Brown, Anne-Marie Doherty and others (see for example, Bell, Brown & Carson, 1996). Although a wide variety of interests were represented, exchanges were largely convivial, although there was no pretence that attending constituted a likeminded group. Thus there existed a community of scholars who found these ventures stimulating and continued to attend them but with no wider interest beyond that.

The differences between these earlier ventures and CCT are threefold. Firstly, while the “retreats” these were transient affairs CCT has become a long-standing institution. Secondly, CCT is bound to its originators who are now its apologists who took up the gauntlet (perhaps the poisoned chalice) proffered by Iacobucci. While they may strive to avoid ethnocentrism, it is inevitable that their worldview is moulded by their own experiences. Which makes one wonder what will happen to CCT when they depart the scene; will this be like what happened to the *Rolling Thunder* tour? Third, these legislators had a specific goal that was pragmatic and strategic, to enhance the job-prospects of CCT scholars. Of the community that forms around CCT conferences, many are only loosely identified or even hostile to the strategic “community” that is manufactured by its legislators.

General Discussion of Interpretivism

To what extent does interpretive consumer research form a separate paradigm to its mainstream counterpart? In a review of the field Deighton et al. (2010) describe two main categories of consumer research comprising psychologically informed experiments, and qualitative research papers, which, “put the disembodied heads of consumers, which are the focus of the psychological studies, back on their bodies, situate them in a culture and moment, and so provide a rich contextual understanding of consumer behaviour”. They thus assume a complementarity that recognizes that they each approach the subject from different directions. Occasionally, as discussed above, concepts such as “brand community” appear to traverse the boundary. But is the interpretive construct “brand community” the same as the “brand community” rendered as a variable for quantitative

study? Do these two conceptions share similar ontological and epistemological assumptions and a similar view of human nature? Additionally, many interpretive studies are appended with interpretive frameworks, that within a positivist frame, would be described as models specifying cause-effect relations.

Ontologically, nominalism is a defining criterion for interpretive research and in line with this those advocating introspection or existential phenomenological explanations share a concern to preserve the life-world of the subject. To facilitate this they argue the importance of obtaining a pure record of subjective experience that is uncontaminated by the presuppositions of the researcher. Some argue for the superiority of introspection, cutting out the need for an interlocutor, as the researcher reflects on his or her own conscious experience, by, “tracking, experiencing and reflecting on one's own thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations, and behaviors” (Gould, 1995, 719).³⁰² Introspection has been criticized, not least for seeming to assume that self-reflection provides direct access to consciousness in the face of evidence to the contrary, when it is known that perception is subject to a range of cognitive, attributional and memory biases.³⁰³ Added to this, to speak of introspection is to tacitly endorse the idea that consciousness is inside the head and the world outside (Zahavi, 2008). Interpretive interviews carry their own dangers; Gould (1995) warns that, “the truth of a consumer’s experience cannot be obtained by transporting an outside researcher into that consumer’s mind (ibid.: 721). This is especially problematic when, as Goulding notes (1999), researcher and subject are from radically different milieu. Given that the researcher’s values play an important role in the overall interpretation presented to the reader, reflexive awareness is encouraged as an antidote to overcome this problem.

A more serious question is whether “phenomenological” interviews are in accord with phenomenology? Returning to the article by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), this was influential in promoting a turn towards a more phenomenological scientific style and as a precursor to the development of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Thompson et al. (1989) had earlier adopted the trappings of Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) focus on experience but rejected its substance, in favour of what they describe as an existential-phenomenological approach to recovering the lived experience of the consumer. As mentioned above, this presents the difficulty that “phenomenological” interviews separate inside from outside and privilege the former inner experience. Zahavi quotes Merleau-Ponty³⁰⁴ to highlight that for the phenomenologist, “(i)inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself” (Zahavi, 2008: 27). It can be argued that the existential phenomenological approach developed by Thompson et al. (1989) resolves antimonies such as inside/

³⁰² Authors have provided a number of insights. See for example, Gould, (1991, 1995), Wallendorf & Trucks, (1993), Campbell, (1997), Holbrook, (1995; 2017); Wohlfehl & Whelan, 2012).

³⁰³ Dozens of examples can be found on Wikipedia, “List of Cognitive Biases”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases. Accessed August 2019.

³⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, (1962: 407) - See reference in Zahavi.

outside and the Cartesian separation of mind from body. Indeed these researchers discuss how mainstream consumer research perpetuates such fallacies. True to the interpretivist spirit they advise the researcher to bracket their presuppositions so as to ensure that the data is pure and uncontaminated. They describe the phenomenological interview as an idiographic method that proceeds by collecting first-hand accounts. The researcher is alert to figural patterns, paying particular attention to words that relate to the body. The interview then moves beyond description of individual case histories towards thematic analysis of a set of interviews on a given topic, using groups to validate whether descriptions are based on data. They discuss their research into shopping behaviour which identified themes of restriction/ lack of restriction, organization /disorganization and completeness /incompleteness. In a subtle distinction that may well be lost on mainstream researchers, they justify thematic analysis on the grounds that it is not to provide generalisability but rather to aid in interpretation across a more diverse set of experiences.

This idea of the phenomenological interview is shared by many social sciences and is by no means exclusive to consumer research. However philosophers from Husserl to Derrida have criticized this approach, by arguing that phenomenology is a form of transcendental philosophy and not empirical psychology (Zahavi, 2008). In this view phenomenology is not concerned with the psychological question of how a pre-existing reality (objectivity) is subjectively apprehended by psychical beings but is rather concerned with the question of what it means for something to be real and objective in the first place and in particular with the transcendental questions concerning the very condition of possibility for manifestation. (Zahavi, 2008: 667). This distinction is key, because if the core aim of phenomenology is to understand what it means for something to be taken as real and objective in the first place, then interviews with consumers will yield next to no knowledge of the processes at work. For instance, although interpretive researchers criticize the Cartesianism of the mainstream and claim to have included the body in their own work, their accounts are no less so by their exclusive focus on the discourse produced from the conscious reflection of their participants. Because we do not have direct access to our own experience and given the centrality of non-conscious automatic processes, what we consciously experience is not a good guide to what is really going on (Metzinger & Gallese, 2003). Classical phenomenology is not just another name for a form of psychological self-observation but rather seeks to reflect on the conditions of possibility of experience and cognition.

Moreover, by seeking to apprehend these conditions of possibility, phenomenologists such as Dan Zahavi (2008) and Shaun Gallagher (2006; 2013) recognize the limitations of phenomenological interviews and widely cite experimental evidence in support their respective arguments. Unlike CCT theorists they do not shirk from admitting findings from experimental research into the operation of pre-verbal engagements that can be described as cultural. The narrow way in which CCT theory construes culture in relation to discourse which is linked to its traditional antipathy to nomothetic research precludes such engagement and thus seriously undermines the phenomenological quest.

CCT subsequently drifted from its original interpretive orientation to include a multiplicity of perspectives including post-structuralism which makes different ontological and epistemological presuppositions. As a result of this diversity not much is written today about extending our understanding of culture through interpretive schemes such as the experiential phenomenological approach once enthusiastically advocated by CCT researchers.

How successful has the CCT “community” been in achieving its core aim? It is telling that in their editorial reflecting on CCT in *Marketing Theory*, the editors reflected almost entirely on a genealogical discussion of its membership network to the virtual exclusion of its contribution to theory (Askegaard & Scott, 2013). One crude measure is obtained by using Google Scholar to count CCT-oriented publications in *JCR*. This indicated that sixty-three such articles were published between 2005 and 2018. It is noteworthy that Russell Belk has published thirty-five papers in *JCR*.

While there are benefits to adopting an interpretive approach, Dolan (2002) warns against cultural reductionism. For instance, it is a mistake to think of sustainability in purely cultural terms to argue instead that one can adopt a relativist epistemology and a realist ontology. Culture and meaning are important, but they ignore the crucial materialist dimension, that objects, including us, are made from stuff, and that in relation to sustainability, materials must be extracted, fabricated, used and disposed of and transported at several points in the process. He raises the nominalist spectre of Bishop Berkeley who wisely ignored the injunction to The naturalist fallacy – to reduce the multiplicity of the real inchoate reality we are immersed in to the cultural signifier of “nature” is to commit a “naturalistic misunderstanding”.

Critical Consumer Research

This is not considered here in detail given that much already been discussed above in relation to macromarketing and Consumer Culture Theory. In relation to fetishism, Leiss (1976) and Jhally et al. (1985) argued that fetishism is now quite different to what it was in the time of Marx. Their definition of fetishism as any representation of political economy such as the market, that refers to it, or them, as autonomous, is in line with Marx; however their explanation, which focuses on the symbolic meanings transferred onto products through advertising is not quite so structural. Kline and Leiss (1978) had previously charted the development of this change from the early 1900s onwards, describing how marketers made extensive use of market research to refine the meanings they gave to brands to ensure that these resonate with the meanings valued by the target audience. Goldman (1992: 31) argued in this vein that commodity fetishism is never more appropriate than in relation to advertising, where objects are imbued with human characteristics, while humans only appear as properly human when associated with the appropriate commodity signs. Others point out that advertising, although important, is just one aspect of the complex communicative context of fetishism where the product label and logo also act as vehicles to enable identification as is the design of the product itself and the place in which it is offered for sale (Miles, 1998).

While Marx's argument about fetishism is structural, the above arguments about the role of symbolic meaning communicated through advertising point back towards the subject who identifies with this meaning. Billig (1999) turned the heat away from structure and onto the subject by conjecturing that fetishism might occur as the result of repression, as "willed forgetting" of disturbing material. The problem with this is that while Freud associated repression with the curtailment of the pleasure principle, far from repressing enjoyment, marketing actively seduces consumers into constant engagement in the insatiable pursuit of pleasure. However, Billig concluded that fetishism seems to be neither conscious nor unconscious but is rather a kind of willed, collective unmindfulness, in which case repression may provide an apt explanation. However Cluley and Dunne (2012) were unconvinced by this argument, suggesting that narcissism provides a better psychoanalytic explanation of fetishism. According to them the consumer may know full well that the trainers they want to buy are made in sweatshop conditions but they act as *if* they are not aware. In their view Individuals in the role of consumers continually disavow the knowledge of the harm that their consumption causes through compartmentalization, by foregrounding their own satisfaction and pushing down the adverse unwelcome consequences of their actions on others. They contend that fetishism is a particular form of disavowal that is apparent in contexts where our desires and wishes come into conflict with what we know to be true. In their rather bleak summation, the field of consumption is as much about depriving and harming others as it is about satisfying our needs; "we perpetuate the suffering of others through our consumption we give vent to the narcissistic side of ourselves we want to deny, which we generally repress, obtaining sadistic satisfaction in the process "as an expression of other-abasing self-love" (ibid.: 253).

Others highlight the fetishism that they argue is endemic to the organization of academic research on consumption in cultural studies and consumer research. It has become fashionable to argue that we now live in a consumer society, as if there were no production anymore. Authors in cultural studies and consumer research celebrate the consumer as an active agent who derives aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment from their consumption of commodities, fashioning identity by playing on the keyboard of commodity signs. Angela McRobbie (1997) critiqued those authors who treat consumption as separate from production, who celebrate the pleasures derived from fashion and ignore the misery of fashion production, especially for women. Billig (1999) criticizes the later work of Jean Baudrillard (1987), which he argues is fetishistic by promoting the notion that electronic communication networks are somehow immaterial, thus ignoring the conditions of those workers who toil to extract the necessary rare-earth elements necessary to production and the conditions of the workers in factories such as those operated by Foxconn. On this basis fetishism is inbuilt into the structure of academic discourse, apparent in dedicated journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of Consumer Psychology* that concretize the analytic separation of production from consumption to focus on the enjoyment of affluent consumers and by ignoring the immiseration of the worker..

Fitchett et al. (2014) focus on the political context, or rather the lack of discussion by contending that , “it is virtually inconceivable to imagine the historical evolution of consumer research and cultural-turn research in particular, independently of the political choice of the period...yet the creation myths of CCT rarely acknowledge this ‘context’ at all.’ The authors point to compartmentalization, that consumer researchers have focused on the realm of consumption as somehow encapsulated and insulated from politics, despite the massive consequences political decisions have had for social and individual life resulting from the privatization of state-owned assets and the outsourcing of services, together with the promotion of the much vaunted neoliberal conception of the individual as entrepreneur of the self. However, when the doyens of Consumer Culture Theory argued the need to study “a broader range of consumption experiences and practices” (Thompson et al., 2013, 155), they provided no hint that they might have this broader picture in mind which is key to understanding, as,

It really should be no surprise to find that when taxes and government were cut, state owned enterprises were privatized and markets were deregulated, one consequence was that people experience more aspects of daily life as choice making individual consumers, that more aspects of economic activity are mediated via commodity relations and markets appear to be free and liberated contexts in which to pursue and enact newly possible market-type behaviours and subjectivities.

Questions pertaining to financialization and the machine which were mentioned in chapter two may also be of interest to critical marketers. Ewen discusses how the finance sector played a central role in the development of markets in the twentieth century, describing the allure of consumer credit for consumers who were promised that they could realize their dreams right now, only to be subjected to the disciplinary power of constant indebtedness. Dholakia (2012) provides an overview of the growth of finance capital in the USA from the instalment plans of the early 1900s to the maxed-out credit cards today.

Postmodernism

It should be stated at the outset that there is no such thing as *postmodernism*, but rather of *postmodernisms*, a family of explanations that collectively proclaimed the death of the Enlightenment project of 18th century which has failed in its quest towards achieving a progressively more ethical, rational, technological and unifying social order. Authors describe a world turned upside-down; Instead of progress, there is eternal return; in place of wholes, there is fragmentation; rather than depth, there is the incessant play of surfaces; where simulacra replace reality; dominated by visions of dystopia rather than utopia. That these ideas are associated primarily with “post-structuralist” French philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jack-Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixious, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is no accident, due to the influence of the social ferment that gripped France in the period around 1968. These ideas were complemented by Americans such scholars such as Daniel Bell, Judith Butler, John Fiske and Frederic Jameson. However

the basic strands of postmodernism can be traced back to structuralism and the work of Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, the Frankfurt School and others.

Although the original works of postmodernism date back fifty years, it was not until the 1990s that these ideas became prominent in the social sciences, eventually finding their way to the subjects of management, marketing and consumer research. Postmodernism can be bewildering to the reader due to the number of authors, the fact that they do not tend to acknowledge each other, the sheer variety of concepts and the density of explanation.

Stephen Brown (1995, 1998) who became the face of postmodernism in marketing was faced with the onerous challenge to (ironically) weave a coherent narrative from multiple strands that proclaimed the end of modernist ideals of rationality and progress and of a society rooted in the stability of class-structure where meaning was given by one's employment. Brown describes the shift in postmodernity to forms of self-production in the realm of consumption in the marketplace amid the play of signifiers, coupled with an overriding sense of ennui experienced by the individual immersed in the depthless superficiality of commodity culture. Below I use the categories devised by Dick Hebdige (1995: 185-207) who suggests that postmodernist authors can at least agree on what they are against; firstly they are against totalisation; secondly, they are against ideology and finally, they are against utopian ideals. I add a fourth item to this list, which is that postmodern authors are against grand schemes of ethics for which they substitute the idea of the localised practice of individual responsibility.

Against totalisation: Postmodern theorists resist any attempt to totalize or to universalize, for instance by assuming that there is an essential human nature or destiny. This is related to their argument that scientific knowledge cannot be value-free but is always infused with power. This built on the suspicion of positive science voiced by critical theorists such as Lukacs and Marcuse, who argued that this operates in the interests of increasing efficiency through the progressive extension of technological rationality. The basis of modern science is that it does not tell a story but reveals the truth about the state of the world. The Enlightenment basis of this is that the knowledge produced by science will free humanity from the grip of servitude to superstition and ignorance. The corollary to this is that academics have the freedom to venture as they see fit without fear of sanction to explore questions they find interesting. In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean Francois Lyotard (1991) employed Austin's idea of performativity to argue that the idea that education should aim for the emancipation of the individual through the development of autonomous critical thought, has been reduced in the postmodern era to training in the skills demanded by the market and the autonomous individual has been replaced by the disciplined, biddable individual described by Foucault.

Elizabeth Hirschman (1985) was one of the first to evaluate the assumption that consumer research is value-free. She found instead that this is deeply influenced by the attitudes, personalities, ideologies and values of authors who are predominantly male and middle-classes. In a further article based on an analysis of papers published in the *Journal of*

Consumer Research, Hirschman, (1993) sought to demonstrate the dominance of male ideology and how, despite arguments for consumer sovereignty routinely presented in marketing textbooks, the academic literature portrays marketers as having power over consumers. Bristor and Fisher (1993), made similar points, for instance, when arguing from a post-structuralist perspective argue that the subjugation of women is naturalised in everyday language, when women were described with respect to their marital status as “house-wives”, or “career-women”, terms not used to describe males. The adherence of consumer research to the goal of increasing the control of the marketer was evident in the longstanding practice for papers published in *JCR* to devote a special section that outlined the “managerial implications” of their research. This fuels the suspicion that what matters is not the *truth* of a particular finding but whether or not this knowledge is *useful* for marketing professionals. The link between knowledge and truth was abandoned by many economists in the years following Milton Friedman's (1953) argument that economists should give up the quest to understand behaviour as all that matters is that this can successfully be predicted.

A related issue raised by Campbell Jones (2003) in the context of organization theory is relevant in the context of consumer research, “It is almost as if theory is done outside... and the best we can do is to raid these other sources (badly most of the time)” (Jones, 2003: 514). This question has still to be posed, let alone answered in a consumer research journal, but one suspects the answer will be that theoretical contributions and developments from economists, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists will always weigh more heavily than those that come from within the discipline. Since Lyotard (1991) first wrote about performativity, the university has been almost entirely reduced to a business-machine, subject to ever-increasing monitoring of staff and control by managers. The value-free production of knowledge is further compromised through the undue influence of powerful governmental and industrial interest groups that have a stake in what “knowledge” is published... and what is not. Added to this the governance of prestigious academic journals, has come under question, some of which have been severely compromised.

Against Ideology. Hebdige (1996) discusses postmodern theorists’ rejection of teleological, or purposive explanations, rooted in the Enlightenment belief that the application of rational principles to the world’s problems will result in continuous progress towards emancipation. They reject all theories of progress from Hegelian and Marxist dialectics to Norbert Elias’s explanation of the “civilising process” and modernist arguments that humanity is on a trajectory towards a more enlightened and pacific future. In place of these they substitute Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return and a never-ending present. One can trace intimations of this anti-teleological turn to de Saussure’s argument that the meaning of a term is not given, but is arbitrary, based on its synchronic position within the language system and in Lacan’s further argument that the signifier has precedence over the signified. Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard developed the radical implications of such arguments by separately arguing that the postmodern scene involves the construction of hyperrealities where the model takes precedence over the real thing.

Umberto Eco describes the fascination with hyperreal environments ranging from replicas of medieval castles to theme pubs, which strike the observer as somehow more authentically real than the real thing, which is tawdry by comparison. Baudrillard further develops the concept to argue that nowadays it is ubiquitous for models to precede and generate what we take to be reality. He argues that the Marxist notion of the expropriation of surplus value is outmoded, as value is now created through the production and exchange of hyperreal simulacra, from avatars to futures markets. In one of his texts Baudrillard asks what if it were possible to produce a map that precisely covers all of reality, such that to all extent and purposes the map *is* reality? This came to pass in the runup to the first Gulf War, when the US military used high-quality satellite phot-reconnaissance to construct an exact digital map of Iraq which was used not only to simulate the invasion and to monitor this in real time. Such developments informed Baudrillard's later pronouncement that the Gulf War did not take place. He certainly had a point, given not only that the war was fought by one side on a simulated landscape but also that for those not involved, it was entirely constructed as a media spectacular.³⁰⁵ Baudrillard was prescient, because technology today, never mind those that are just over the horizon, is capable of simulating a war or indeed any form of "reality" one might wish for. However, it can be argued that his statement was hyperbolic and went too far, disrespecting multiple sources of evidence to the contrary and the memories of those who suffered and died.

Hebdige (1996) mentions another aspect of Lyotard's' argument based on Kant's work on aesthetics which distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful refers to the pleasure derived from the harmonious and orderly aspects of artwork that provide pleasure, while the sublime refers to an unformed wilderness that inspires awe and terror in the viewer. The manicured golf course at Augusta might be thought of as an example of the beautiful, whereas that of a terrible and threatening untamed wilderness, perhaps of the Moon or Mars, might be described as sublime. Lyotard argued that modern theorists focused on the harmonious, controllable realm of the beautiful to the exclusion of the sublime and that identification with the beautiful has fuelled the presumption that fullness of knowledge can be achieved. Indeed those individuals who have controlled society such as Robespierre, Hitler, Stalin and Mao assumed a stance of omnipotence, just as their counterparts today, Jinping, Trump, and Putin, who identify *themselves* as the embodiment of Reason, "we are the proletariat". Writing in the shadow of Auschwitz and the atom bomb postmodernists are committed to an aesthetics of the sublime that is beyond the beautiful, which points to that which cannot be contained which is monstrous and unthinkable. Elements of the sublime appear in Lacan's concept of the Real that is beyond signification and in Derrida's concept of the aporia, which highlights the self-contradictory nature of human discourse.

Against Ethics: From the above it seems clear that questions of morality are of key importance to postmodern theorists. That said, they are against formalised expressions

³⁰⁵ See McKinley, C.A.S. (1996) When the enemy has our eyes, esp. pp. 30-35. <https://spp.fas.org/eprint/mckinley.pdf>

of ethics such as deontology and utilitarianism. Why so? Jacques Derrida and Zygmunt Bauman were influenced by Emmanuel Levinas³⁰⁶ who argued that rather than working in the interests of morality these formal schemes actually create distance between the moral parties. There is no room here to summarize Levinas's explanation, but in my view its core is that humans first and foremost have a responsibility towards the moral 'face' of the other. This sense of moral responsibility is not acquired but conferred from birth, but it is then squeezed out as we learn to follow our self-interest.

Conclusion

My initial reason for writing this chapter was to try gain grasp on the overall academic subject no matter how feeble or rudimentary that might be, because one can judge better when one knows something about the context. I have a few preliminary observations. Firstly, while from the perspective of critical researchers the marketing mainstream is conservative, by comparison to its sister field of economics, marketing journals have published research that has been broadly critical of neoliberal assumptions. Secondly, although critics are sceptical of the generally individualist and celebratory image of consumer culture portrayed by interpretive scholars, rich descriptions of the practices of flesh and blood individuals are interesting as cases in their own right and can also provide resources for subsequent researchers to reflect on and critique. Arguments about the narrowness of scope of the subject remind me of the comment made by an eminent marketing scholar that I came across years ago, but can't now remember where, that marketers study consumers in the same way that fishermen study fish, rather than as marine biologists do.

Marketing and consumer research is a broad church that has welcomed ideas arising in fields with more academic capital such as economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and the arts. My hunch is that this is openness which provides rich ground for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, is linked to the mongrel status of a discipline that continues to suffer from an inferiority complex in relation to its more prestigious peers.

The mainstream seems to be slowly awakening to its ideological biases and positioning and it is encouraging that journal editors have stated their intention to adopt something akin to a neutral social scientific approach to the subject by recognising that research that was once purported to describe universal aspects of marketing and consumption behaviour has been almost overwhelmingly linked to a 'Northern' perspective which focuses overmuch on individual consumption and on a particular conception of that individual. On the other hand, as mentioned in chapter eight, criticisms of the narrowness of the subject date back over fifty years and there is urgent need for change.

That this chapter is long and tedious, is a sign of my naïve optimism when I started out to write it. It was only when I decided that enough was enough and I had to complete it and get on with my life that I became aware of its many omissions, not just of authors whose work I esteem but of entire subject areas. Now these omissions press on me. I ought to

³⁰⁶ See for instance, Levinas, (1961).

have discussed subjects and individuals who have been marginalised by the mainstream and indeed subject areas and individual idiosyncrasies can meet head-on in the dedication of some to their subject. Here I am thinking in particular of Robert (Bob) Grafton-Small, a dedicated essayist who developed his unique style of expression in the lineage of James Addison and George Orwell, and also Gordon Foxall who developed intentional behaviourism. It would been interesting too to include discussion of ‘street-smart’ views of marketing which are hostile to all things academic, at least if my interview with “guerrilla marketer” Orvel Ray Wilson was anything to go by. It is fair to state that our (as yet unpublished) interview didn’t start out too well, “Okay DOCTOR SIR, what do you want to KNOW?”, growled Orvel, displaying an “hospitable” knuckle-crunching, hyper-masculinity characteristic of a certain breed of male from that benighted country. That said, we did manage to have a reasonable discussion and Orvel was of course, generous to a fault, handing me copies of his book and videos on my departure.

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Chapter Four: From Liberalism to Neoliberalism - and Beyond

Introduction

That this is not necessarily the best time to be writing about liberalism is evident as once fervent adherents proclaim its demise.³⁰⁷ Growing disbelief in the progressive goals of the neoliberal project was perhaps heralded by the rise of doom-laden millenarian movements in the USA and Israel at the turn of the century. A growing sense of slippage, that the world is entering a period of flux and fragmentation became manifest in the wake of the global financial meltdown. This was felt keenly in Europe following the Brexit referendum, through the rapid growth of right-wing parties and illiberal democracies, in the shadow of the first major conflict on European soil since World War Two. But this is a global phenomenon. Who knew that the flames of autocracy would be stoked and lit so quickly. The states ruled by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Giorgia Meloni, Javier Milei, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, Prabowo Subianto and Donald Trump (47) are now added to the growing list of illiberal democracies in danger of becoming outright autocracies – and there will surely be more. These regimes can be seen as a rejection of liberalism itself, in the views of one commentator, of voters using, “democracy to turn against the values of tolerance, justice, fairness, openness, science and the rule of law”.³⁰⁸ Given which, this chapter might better be regarded as providing something of a flavour of a state of affairs that to an extent might once have prevailed somewhere in the imagination of some, but is now receding in the rear-view mirror, in the wake of the angel of history.

This chapter attempts to provide the broadest possible description of the institutional context in which issues pertaining to power and consumption are contested in what today is a threatened species,³⁰⁹ comprising remaining liberal democratic states that continue to follow the ‘rules-based order’ that emerged from the destruction of the Second World War, such that the polity consists of polyarchy, or representative government, and as places where the rights of the individual are guaranteed, and the

³⁰⁷ For instance, John Gray (2023).

³⁰⁸ Vaidhyanathan, S. (2025). With the 21st century a quarter complete, illiberal democracy is the new global norm, *The Guardian*, 7th January.

³⁰⁹ Estimates are that 5.7 billion people in the world now live under authoritarian rule. See for instance, Lindberg, S.I. (2023). The world is becoming increasingly authoritarian, but there is hope. *University of Gothenburg*, 2nd March.

economy is organised along capitalist lines.³¹⁰ Here "liberalism" carries a very specific meaning pertaining to the system of thought that sprang up in the eighteenth century³¹¹ to proclaim the principle of individual self-determination in economic and political life, that eventually came to advocate liberal democracy in the political realm and the market in the economic realm, as the best guarantors of individual freedom and the social good. Key to this was a shift in power, from the despotism of the absolute ruler of the medieval age to the sovereign individual. This chapter is divided into three parts; part one discusses liberalism, part two, neoliberalism and in part three I try to outline ideas as to what is happening today.

³¹⁰ In *The New Leviathans*, John Gray (2023: 40-42) argues that in contrast to democracies the shaping of the state as we see it today in India under Narendra Modi, and in China, under Xi Jinping, has been influenced by illiberal Western ideas such as that peddled by Carl Schmitt, a one-time Nazi, who argued contrary to Hobbes, that the role of Leviathan is not to protect the people from insecurity and violence, but rather to protect a unified people, which in Modi's India refers to Hindus, thus excluding Sikhs and Muslims, while in Xi's China, it refers to Han, and the exclusion and persecution of minorities such as Uighurs and Tibetans.

³¹¹ Klein, D.B. (2014). The origins of liberalism. *The Atlantic*, 13th Feb.

Part One: Liberalism

What exactly is or was liberalism? For John Gray (1995), liberalism consists of a number of family resemblances; it is individualist, asserting the moral primacy of the person over the social whole; it is egalitarian, inasmuch as all individuals irrespective of religion or race are accorded the same moral status and worth; it is universalist by affirming the moral unity of the human species; and finally, it is meliorist in holding that the future can be better than the past or the present. Liberalism is associated with Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Voltaire and Rousseau, each of whom lent it a different complexion. Through his creation of *Leviathan* Hobbes provided a rationale for free individuals to give up a portion of this to the state in their own interests as much as that of the common weal. Spinoza took this further to argue against authoritarian government and for the institution of democracy to guarantee freedom of thought, speech and association. John Locke on the other hand whose ideas were particularly influential in the USA, foregrounded individual liberty and the right to personal private property.

When liberals speak of liberty they generally mean negative liberty, that the individual should be able to do as they wish, free from constraint. There are tensions in modern democratic states between the call to maximise negative liberty, which requires a limited role for the state, and democracy, which requires a strong state for the preservation of the equality of individual rights. Questions pertaining to individual liberty loomed large for Locke and the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, for whom the individual ought to be let free to pursue their self-interest, and by extension, for the liberalism of labour and trade. On the other hand, while the French revolutionaries also proclaimed liberty as a guiding value, the more lasting legacy of the Revolution was the principle of equality which accords the individual citizen a say in the choice of who governs the state.³¹²

Leviathan

Hobbes' great work *Leviathan* was published in 1651 following a period of considerable unrest and just before the restoration of Charles the Second of England. A royalist, Hobbes had fled England for France in 1640 and did not return until the end of the period of Cromwellian rule. This is apt given that he imagined a state of nature amongst free individuals as a war of all against all against which fearsome prospect he surmised that the individual would prefer to cede a portion of their freedom and sovereignty to Leviathan, an absolute ruler who could guarantee order. In this ideal picture Leviathan is an organic whole such that the "body politic" envelopes the bodies of the monarch and those of his or her subjects. The linkage of the royal body to their subjects meant that apart from the Church which enjoyed a certain independence, most social institutions including the economic mercantile system, were incorporated as part of the monarch's patronage and favour. Hobbes also mentioned the right of the individual to defend themselves from attack, an idea that was subsequently broadened by John Locke.

³¹² In his review of Jean Jaurès *History of the French Revolution*, Philippe Marlière describes this was essentially liberal in tone but with the establishment of the First Republic of 1792 there began the process movement towards a socialist state which would recognize the Rights of Man and the Citizen and extend economic rights and social justice to workers (Marlière, 2023).

Principles guaranteeing individual rights were subsequently enshrined in the Declaration of Independence drafted by Jefferson and in the Declaration of the Rights of Man produced by the National Assembly of France during the Revolution.³¹³

Whilst Hobbes provided an ideal account, Foucault illustrated the extreme violence at the disposal of the monarch, especially that deployed against those who attack their own person. At the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, he describes with seeming relish the lengthy evisceration and execution in 1757 of the regicide Damiens. For Foucault, this particular execution was important as the last of its kind in France, marking a turning-point from the monstrous but rather haphazard spectacle of absolute power characteristic of the pre-modern period, toward the more regularized form of disciplinary power that emerged in the modern period. Foucault was not novel in positing a shift toward a society based on discipline, given that Norbert Elias (1939) had made this same point many years earlier, albeit on the basis of a very different argument. Although Foucault's (1975) account foregrounds the formidable monopoly of violence at the disposal of the medieval monarch, importantly, this was widely regarded as legitimate. Legitimacy, which in Europe was conferred by the spiritual authority of the Church was of great importance in gaining the acquiescence of the populace by sanctifying the monarch with the imprimatur of the "Divine Right" to rule.

Leviathan Reborn: The Modern Nation-State

In Europe from the closing years of the seventeenth, and into the eighteenth century, the very notion of a divine right to rule was dashed by forces that wrought fundamental changes to the topology of power. The notion of the sovereign as absolute ruler imbued with a 'divine' right of patronage over religion, legal affairs and the economic system was swept aside by the American and French Revolutions of 1776 and 1789, respectively. 1776 was also year when Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was first published, and although it took decades for the ideas contained therein to become common currency, the economic sphere was soon convulsed and transformed by subsequent Industrial, consumer and agrarian revolutions. In France in 1789, the political sphere resounded to cries for liberty, freedom and equality under the law, not just freedom from colonization, but for individual freedom enshrined in individual rights.³¹⁴ While real change on the ground came slowly, especially for minorities, and more often than not as the outcome of

³¹³ From the Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness -- That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.'

From the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Article two 'The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.'

³¹⁴ Source: John Locke (1690) *Second Treatise of Government*. American Declaration of Independence July 2nd 1776; Declaration of the Rights of Man, August 26th 1789.

violent struggle, these social convulsions eventually brought the modern nation-state into being as the seat of sovereign power and guardian of the rights of the individual.³¹⁵

A Hard Road: Struggles for Equality of Representation

In one account, the world's first modern representative democracy instituted in the United States of America came about as an indirect consequence of the 1776 revolutionary war against England. In one understanding citizens agreed to representative government only because this protected their liberty from state interference.³¹⁶ Some argue that the roots of American democracy stretch back into the late the medieval period in England after Magna Carta, when the power of the absolute monarch began to be curtailed by a parliament consisting of nobles and high bourgeois administrators. Initially appointed by the monarch, the growing power of parliament led this arrangement to slowly develop into a more representative system.

In Britain, similar to that practiced in ancient Greek states citizenship was at first reserved for the wealthy male elite. Demands for reform mounted during the period of industrialization that occurred in the eighteenth century when rapidly growing cities enjoyed little or no political representation. Agitation for civil rights provoked a brutal response from government, as in Manchester, when mounted cavalry attacked a huge crowd that gathered in St. Peter's Fields to demand equality of representation, an event commemorated today as the "Peterloo massacre".³¹⁷ As the result of mounting pressure, Parliament passed The Great Reform Act of 1832 which granted suffrage to all male leaseholders, thus excluding the working-classes and women. This lit a slow-burning fuse for the excluded to wage long-lasting campaigns that came to fruition some eighty years later in 1918, when the right to vote was granted to all men and property-owning women aged over thirty. Women aged over twenty-one had to wait until 1929 before being accorded the privilege.³¹⁸ In Northern Ireland, as a consequence of a campaign of civil disobedience by the Civil Rights movement, it was only in 1969 that those who did not own property aged over twenty-one years of age gained the right to vote in local government elections.³¹⁹

³¹⁵ 'The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.' – Article 3 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man; approved by the National Assembly of France, 1789.

³¹⁶ Wood, G.S. (1999). The Origins of American Democracy, or How the People Became Judges in Their Own Causes, The Sixty-Ninth Cleveland-Marshall Fund Lecture. *Cleveland State Law Review*, 47(3),

³¹⁷ Hirsch, Shirin, *Protest and Peterloo, the story of 1819*. People's History Museum.

³¹⁸ The grant of the vote to all men in The Representation of the Peoples Act (1918) came just after the First World War during which millions of working-class men had given up their lives for king and country. To put it into perspective, 11% of men were entitled to vote in 1831, rising to 18% in 1832, 32% in 1868 and 63% in 1885. By 1918 all men aged over 21 and 57% of women had the vote, rising to almost 100% in 1929. (B.R. Mitchell, British Historical Statistics, Rallings and Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts*, 1832-2012.

³¹⁹ Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1969.

Many of those who campaigned for equality of representation such as those at Peter's Field in Manchester were purportedly influenced by the events of the French Revolution and by works such as *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine (1791). Born in England, Paine, who fled to France and to North America was one of the sternest critics of monarchic authority, whose direct style influenced Benjamin Franklin and George Washington amongst many others. His earlier work *Common Sense* took from Locke the notion that the primary duty of a government is to protect the rights of its citizens.

Twelve years after the revolution, a democratic framework for government was inscribed in the first three articles of the Constitution of the United States, specifying the separation of powers between legislative, executive, and judicial spheres. Influenced by John Locke (1690), for whom citizens have rights to life, liberty and property, Thomas Jefferson inscribed citizens' rights to negative liberty into the *Declaration of Independence*.³²⁰ James Madison addressed citizens' concerns about the protection of their liberty by drafting a Bill of Rights which included protections against government infringements on free speech, right of assembly, exercise of religion, the right to bear arms, petition for redress of grievances and the right to a fair trial.

Enthralled by events across the ocean the French revolutionaries of 1789 then called for common principles of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. To the dismay of the English elite, the revolution degenerated into the Terror administered by the Committee of Public Safety under Robespierre. Reports of this prompted a conservative backlash in England against democracy, with the consequence that English liberal theorists became increasingly suspicious of equality and focused exclusively on the promotion of negative liberty, economic freedom and hostility to the state.³²¹

The Liberal Theory of Politics

Those of us who live in the few remaining liberal democracies today will be familiar with the expectation that we participate in politics by voting for our preferred candidates to represent our interests in periodic local and national elections. This form of representative democracy differs from that practiced in the ancient Greek city states where free citizens participated directly in the decisions that affected their lives. It is pertinent to ask questions as to why our system developed differently, how it can be justified, and whether it works to represent the interests of the individual citizen? These questions were taken up by the U.S. political theorist Robert Dahl, for whom polyarchy, or representative democracy offers the most effective means to organize representation in a pluralist society. Dahl developed his theory of power when evaluating the extent to which polyarchy works in practice.

³²⁰ Jefferson, T. (1776). *The original draft of the Declaration of Independence*, <https://classicliberal.tripod.com/jefferson/origdecind.html> However, it is argued by Republicans that the American revolution and constitution owed more to ancient Greek philosophy as relayed through Machiavelli and the English Commonwealthmen than it did to conceptions of liberal rights deriving from Locke (See, Kidd, C. (2024), Review of C.R. Arcenas, (2023). *Antidote to Marx*, Review of America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life, Chicago, *London Review of Books*, 4th Jan., 13-14.

³²¹ 'The conservative reaction triggered by the French Revolution and its aftermath weighed heavily on liberalism in England and on the continent well into the nineteenth century' Starr (2007: 27).

Polyarchy

Polyarchy, a term from ancient Greek which describes rule by the many, was coined by Dahl and Lindblom (1953; 1992) to describe how democracy is actually organised in many countries today. In this account the needs of the people are best served by individuals voting in periodic elections to choose candidates from competing political parties to represent their interests, with the formation of a government formed by the party that gets the most votes and which in-between elections, responds to the interests of like-minded groups that lobby it on a variety of issues. Freedom of expression and access to different sources of information are pre-requisites for informed voter choice which through fair elections at local, regional or national levels, enables the individual citizen to choose those who govern them. During a government's period in office citizens can continue to express their opinions on issues that they feel passionate about by joining a group of likeminded individuals who share their interest. It is assumed that the more intense the feelings of a group of citizens on a particular issue, the more likely they are to have an influence on policy. Interest group activity therefore provides information between elections which allows decision-makers to weight preferences during the formulation of policy.

For Dahl and Lindblom, polyarchy requires protection of freedom of expression, including the ability for the citizen to criticise the government, the status quo and the dominant ideology; that elections are fair and do not involve coercion; and the existence of alternative, and often competing sources of information and persuasion not under the control of the government. Polyarchy is also meant to curtail the power of leaders by making them compete for the role within their own party and at general elections and by giving non-leaders an opportunity to switch their support from incumbents to rivals.

In his early work Dahl had advanced several reasons why polyarchy is best suited for large-scale' complex societies, arguing that the direct form of democracy practiced in ancient Athens was enabled by a number of factors that do not exist today. For example, the electorate that met in the agora to discuss the issues of the day was made up of elite males and excluded women and slaves. As this relatively small elite group of citizens was relatively homogeneous, not only in terms of gender but in relation to age, social standing, ethnicity and religious outlook, it followed that they were not strangers to one another. Additionally, forming part of the elite, citizens were generally well educated and wealthy, with ample time to engage in discussion of matters germane to their common interests. In contrast, modern complex societies are diverse, made up of citizens who differ with respect to their social class, religious outlook, ethnicity, gender and lifestyle. Given also the size of modern democracies Dahl argued that it would be impracticable for every citizen to discuss every issue of importance, or to communicate with all their fellows, even if they were motivated to do so.

Pluralism

Pluralism is the base on which polyarchy is constructed, as it presumes a society that is not monolithic but comprises a multiplicity of relatively autonomous groups, each of which is composed of like-minded individuals, who gather around the articulation of their

common interest. The institutionalisation of polyarchy fosters pluralism by ensuring that the political life of the country is populated and enlivened by a large variety of independent groups.

Dahl recognised that pluralism and capitalism are organised differently in different countries, such as Norway and the United States involving differences in party systems and the role played by trades unions and other interest groups. While noting that pluralism is a necessary prerequisite for polyarchy, he was alive to the potential dangers this might present to democratic functioning. For example, inequalities between citizens can be created and maintained if some sectional interests have better access to organizations and resources than others. Alternatively, an association may take an overly narrow view of a citizen's interest that ignores broader interests by producing and maintaining a "deformed civic consciousness". Such instances may distort the public agenda by promising visible short-run benefits to a small minority of citizens who are well organised, for instance, by delivering reduced taxes for the rich, or providing incentives to property owners rather than on delivering long-run benefits to the majority of unorganized citizens.

For Dahl political equality is the central plank of democracy, enshrined in the principle, one citizen, one vote, although he recognised that the reality can fall short of this ideal and that equality of all citizens is not guaranteed under certain forms of democracy. He argued that in practice democratic governance, 'is far from complete' and indeed can be misused by the majority to deprive minorities of their fundamental rights (Dahl, 1989: 177). He was fully aware of the dangers of populism, or majority rule, which describes the situation in several major democracies today, recognising that these groups may include some of those who once felt excluded, but which can undermine the democratic process by denying political equality to minorities. To counter this tendency, he argued the need for a formal compromise between the rights of the majority and of minorities.

The Institutional Context

This modern nation-state did not arise spontaneously but from struggle and as the result of changes in the institutional context leading to the separation and reconfiguration of powers between legislative, executive and judicial systems of governance which are finely balanced and exist in a delicate relation to each other. This preserves Hobbes' and Rousseau's idea of a social contract which ties the interests of the ruler to those they purport to rule over, who entrust to them the preservation of their security. However, in place of a monolithic *Leviathan*, the overall structure is aimed towards a complex system of checks and balances between these different institutions by separating legislative, executive and judicial branches of the State. The three roles inscribed in the first three articles of the Constitution of the United States specify the role of the legislature to enact laws, the executive to implement them, and the judiciary, to oversee their implementation and to adjudicate disputes.

The institutional context differs from one country to the next. For instance, in the UK where there is no written constitution, the legislature is formed by the House of Commons which houses the Executive, formed by representatives of the governing party and the

Opposition parties, whose job is to scrutinize and challenge legislation proposed by the Executive. This is complemented by the House of Lords, whose role as an upper chamber is to further scrutinize legislation that has passed its initial stages in the lower house, which it then passes back to the lower house for final deliberation and approval by means of a final vote.

There are major differences in different jurisdictions between the organization of different polities in relation voting systems (“First past the Post” versus “Proportional Representation”), the structure of the legislature, the role of the judiciary and even fundamentals, such as definitions of the right to freedom of speech. The precise relation between the political system and the market depends to an extent on the orientation of the Executive to the market. For over fifty years the main thrust has been away from regulation and towards *laissez-faire*.

Polyarchy in practice consists of periodic elections which are competitions between two or more political parties for the endorsement of the electorate. Within pluralist theory the State is held responsive to the expressed needs of the people, as to be re-elected, governments must pursue policies that command sufficient popular support. Robert Dahl argued that a crucial pre-requisite for democracy is the equality of all adult citizens who have an equal right to vote and the opportunity to exercise this right free of coercion.

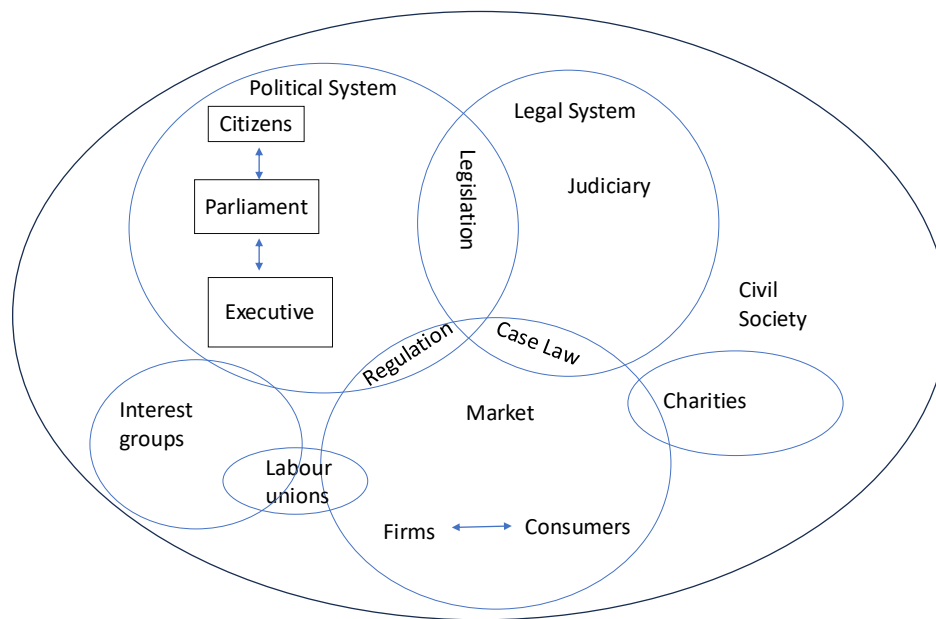
Interest Groups

During a government’s period of office, it is presumed that under changing circumstances the needs of society are channelled through the representations of interest groups. These come into play once a government has been elected when different interests can vie with one another in seeking to press their claims on the formation of policy on a particular issue, to which those parties in the State legislature are expected to respond the more intense the feelings of a group of citizens on a particular issue, the more likely they are to have an influence on policy. Interest group activity therefore provides more information between elections which allows the decision-makers within the state to weigh preferences during the formulation of policy. The government then introduces its proposed legislation, which is opened to scrutiny and debate by the opposition leading to amendments and a final series of votes.

Once enacted it is the role of the judiciary to interpret and apply the laws passed by the legislature. The judiciary can also act as an important check on the power of the Executive. In the United States the Supreme Court can decide that legislation is not valid because it is unconstitutional, and in the UK, the courts have ruled against the government on particular issues of concern. In a notable decision with far-reaching consequences, the UK Supreme Court ruled as unlawful, the Johnson government’s attempt to bypass Parliamentary approval to force through its legislation on Brexit by

proroguing Parliament.³²² Against this a growing and worrying trend amongst disillusioned segments of the population around the world who claim membership of groups that actively dispute the legitimacy of government and of the justice system.³²³

Figure 4.1. A Simplified Model of the Institutional Context



³²² Bowcott, O.; B. Quinn & S. Carrell, (2019) Johnson's suspension of parliament unlawful, supreme court rules. *The Guardian*, 24th September. Some (including me) interpreted this ruling as preserving the authority of the courts as standing as a bastion of democracy against Executive power that sought to bypass Parliament. On the other side of the argument Robert Dahl (1989) described earlier similar actions by the US Supreme Court as forms of "guardianship" that usurp the democratic will of the electorate. The Johnston government's argument was that it was merely trying to inscribe into law the "will of the people" expressed in the Brexit referendum which had since been constantly scuppered by Parliament. Donald Trump sought to ensure that the US Supreme Court would give him no trouble by appointing members amenable to his interests – a ploy that seems to have worked out to date. Today as I write this, in a momentous decision, a French court sentenced Marine Le Pen, head of *National Rally* in France, for misuse of funds, sentencing her to wear a tag for one year, with the important consequence that she was debarred from running for Presidential office in 2027. Her co-accused accused the courts of partisanship and breaching the separation of powers between legislature and the judiciary, an increasingly common tactic.

³²³ Groups such as Sovereign Citizens and Freemen-on-the-Land are growing in the USA, UK, Australia and even Singapore. These groups circulate pseudo-theories as the basis for their rejection of the authority of government and of the courts. Source: Matza, M., (2020). What is the sovereign citizen movement? *BBC*, 5th August.

In this ideal system the individual is presumed to be rational and capable of acting responsibly in their respective roles as citizen and consumer. In relation to the polity, she is expected to participate by taking an active interest by voting in elections and acting as a responsible member of civil society. While the citizen and consumer are considered sovereign, citizens vest a portion of this in those whom they elect to represent their interests. Foucault picked up on this noting the difference between *homo juridicus* who entrusts some of his or her rights to the care of the State and *homo economicus*, who says *you must not*, to State intervention.³²⁴ The antipathy against regulation espoused by liberals can be dated to Adam Smith's invocation of the invisible hand, which advises the individual that if they wish to do good then they should follow their self-interest and not meddle in the affairs of others, because no-one can foresee the consequences of their actions. It follows that just as the individual cannot grasp the totality of action, neither can the sovereign State which must also recognize the limits of its understanding of the economic world which is necessarily opaque and cannot be resolved into a totality (Foucault, 2008: 282).

Acting as political agents by voting in elections, citizens provide a mandate for government to legislate; as juridical agents they are expected to uphold the laws passed by the legislature, as interpreted by an independent judiciary and to participate in jury service if invited. It is important to note that the subjects, *homo politicus*, *homo juridicus* and *homo economicus* and so on are constructed by theorists as ideal types against which to measure real life behaviour. In practice there are complex relations between these different constructions of the individual as an economic, juridical and political agent that should be recognised if we are to develop a meaningful account of power. For instance, the ancient principle of *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) in British Common Law seems to be perfectly in accord with neoliberal arguments that the consumer is rational and has access to perfect information. However, this principle has been set aside by the British courts which have recognised situations where the buyer does not have the opportunity to view goods prior to sale and has had to rely purely on the seller's description.³²⁵

Homo Politicus

As an émigré from Nazi Germany, Kurt Lewin (Lewin et al., 1945) greatly valued democracy which he argued does not come naturally, as one must learn how to listen respectfully to other viewpoints and how to engage with others through reasoned discussion with those who do not share one's views. Lewin passionately believed that democratic principles and practices will wither and die unless they are nurtured and form part and parcel of daily life. He thus advocated the need to widely diffuse democratic principles, leadership, and forms of organization well beyond politics and into business and civil society. Lewin's concern for the collective interest and the importance of dialogue is

³²⁴ Foucault, (2008: 283).

³²⁵ Such rulings eventually led the British government to legislate, leading to the first Sale of Goods Act (1893) which stated that goods must be fit for the purpose for which they were made. The Act was subsequently updated in 1979 and later supplemented by the Consumer Rights Act (2015).

similar to the civic republicanism position elaborated by Philip Petit and Cass Sunstein amongst others, for whom dialogue plays an important role in evolving collective principles of governance.³²⁶ In contrast, Robert Dahl's conception of pluralism offers a very different idea of democracy, where at least in his early work, he argued for a minimal form of citizenship. This was premised on his observation that most people are so caught up in their day-to-day concerns that they see politics as a remote and alien activity to which they are largely indifferent.³²⁷ This formed part of his justification for polyarchy or representative government,³²⁸ going so far to suggest that rather than wondering why so few people vote, it might be better to turn the question around to ask why a minority of individuals actually bother to become actively engaged in politics?

Later in life, particularly concerned by the increasing power of rapidly growing multinational corporations Dahl (1998, 182) swung closer to Lewin's approach and away from a minimalist conception of citizenship by advocating the adoption of participatory democracy in business. His earlier enthusiasm for polyarchy had partly been formulated on grounds of efficiency and economic rationality, that in principle participation in a polyarchic system requires less time and effort to secure optimal results, so the marginal utility of increased participation drops rapidly. However, as is discussed further below, to focus on efficiency can exacerbate the problem of growing inequality and his change of mind was brought on by growing concern, "with a loss of control over an increasingly leviathan-like political and social universe, and a loss of human scale in political and social life".³²⁹

Homo Juridicus

While rights and responsibilities of citizens are either specified in a constitution or enacted through legislation, specific cases are inevitably passed to the courts for interpretation and judgement. Discussion of the modern genesis of rights often stops at the arguments proposed by John Locke and enshrined in the Constitution of the United States by James Madison.³³⁰ Foucault goes well beyond this by arguing that St. Augustine was the ultimate progenitor of the concept of rights by developing the argument in relation to lust,

³²⁶ See Gey, (1993) for a critical comment on civic republicanism.

³²⁷ Dahl's argument here is in line with Schumpeter's (1943) utilitarian argument for minimal democracy and representative government.

³²⁸ Krouse, (1982: 444). Krouse also mentions that for Dahl this was just as well, given his belief that those citizens who are from the lower social classes tend towards authoritarianism and that their increased participation would fuel authoritarian sentiment (ibid.: 448).

³²⁹ Ibid.: 452.

³³⁰ Colin Kidd mentions that the famous commitment to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' in the US Declaration of Independence is taken by many to equate to capitalism, private property and the personal accumulation of wealth. While Locke has long been celebrated as the progenitor of the idea of the limited state, respect for individual liberty and the sanctity of private property more recently it has been argued that the American revolution and constitution were influenced more by ancient Greek philosophy filtered through the works of Machiavelli and the English Commonwealthmen, rather than rights-based liberalism. In this account Locke's ideas were repackaged after the Second World War 'as inoffensive bourgeois liberalism' (Kidd, 2024, 18). Kidd, C. (2024), Antidote to Marx, Review of Rydell, C. (2023). *America's philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life*, Chicago, *London Review of Books*, 4th January, 13-14.

that marriage is a form of contract based on consent.³³¹ When arguing for the separation of legislative from executive power, Locke did not mention the role of the judiciary, because in his view power is related to a function, such as to make a law or to enforce it. Consequently, he did not see the interpretive role of the courts as a distinctive form of power but rather as part and parcel of legislative and executive functions.³³² That said, the interpretive role of the courts plays an extremely important function today in relation to the adjudication of rights.

Timothy Snyder (2015) summons attention to a fundamentally important aspect of citizenship that is easily overlooked, which is the vital importance of the law in upholding citizens' rights. Referring to the Second World War, Snyder describes the sharp contrast between the treatment of those authorised as citizens, whose lives were saved because their rights were upheld, and the plight of those others who were stripped of their citizenship, rendered stateless and reduced to the status of non-persons whom any citizen could torture and murder with impunity. As demonstrated by the travails of the US movement for the realisation of civil rights from the 1960s to the present day, in the face of state repression of passive resistance, rights in the supposed "land of the free" have to be continuously fought over to be gained and retained. Foucault also mentions the role of *homo juridicus* in limiting the power of the state by protecting individual rights, which he contrasts to the very different injunction made in the name of *homo economicus*, which warns the executive to *laissez-faire*, and keep its hands off, which can be interpreted as a bid to "free" the individual from the protective power of the state.

Writing just after the Second World War, at the dawn of the new welfare state in Britain Thomas Humphrey Marshall argued that civil and political citizenship should be overlaid with social citizenship.³³³ His grounds were egalitarian, based on the hope that the welfare state would not only narrow the gap between rich and poor but would transform the very structure of social inequality. Marshall argued that civil rights guaranteeing personal freedom were introduced in the eighteenth-century, succeeded by political rights in the nineteenth, and in the twentieth-century by social rights to economic wellbeing. His account of a smooth progression from one phase to the next has been criticised for being rather starry-eyed in describing the outcome of violent struggle as natural progress. However, it is also argued that he presented a vision of an ideal citizenship against which to measure the reality.

Marshall shared with Robert Dahl a democratic concern to preserve the equality of all citizens, and with Lewin, the need that all citizens are sufficiently educated to make informed choices. His proposed solution was for a system of interlocking political, civil and social rights that operate to preserve equality, for instance, by recognising that the political right to vote depends on the civil right that one can act freely without interference

³³¹ Foucault, (2021), Harcourt, (2012).

³³² Locke, J. in *Two Treatises*, 2.150, mentioned in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (2005). *Locke's Political Philosophy, Part 6, Separation of Powers and the Dissolution of Government*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>

³³³ Marshall, (1950), see also Lister (2005) for commentary and discussion of criticisms.

and the social right that one is sufficiently well-educated to make an informed and a considered decision. The basic argument for the welfare state is that, if all citizens are presumed equal by being accorded political rights, then it is necessary to ensure a baseline of economic wellbeing which enables all to properly engage in their political role. Equality is paramount and all citizens should have equal rights to citizenship.

Consumers and Minority Rights

That the exploitation of the vulnerable is probably as old as the existence of markets, is testified to by ancient religious injunctions against such practices such as that from Amos,.

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, 'when will the new moon be over, that we can sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances.'³³⁴

Common practices have involved everyday products such as the adulteration of food and milk, short-weighting of produce, short-changing of customers, and other forms of sleight of hand. For instance, a report from a Czech market in 1525 found that crushed pepper had been supplemented by sieved bread-crusts, butter adulterated with fat, and the blood of other fish had been added to rotting salmon to give it a fresh appearance.³³⁵ Although markets have been policed from ancient times, the idea of consumer rights has a recent provenance. For instance, in the UK consumer interests were generally conceptualised in terms of protection rather than as rights, through the Trades Description Act (1968) and the Consumer Protection Act, (1987), and it was only in 2015 that the Consumer Rights Act was enacted. A similar situation where protection slowly gave way to rights seems also to feature in relation to minorities such as the disabled,³³⁶ and those identifying initially as 'gay', or later as LGBTQ+.³³⁷

Civil Society: Homo Civicus

While for some civil society is enveloped by Hobbes' commonwealth, or the state, for others this is better thought of as a catch-all that encompasses what that is beyond the polity and the economy encompassing formal religion, the 'voluntary sector', charities, cooperatives, sports, arts, entertainment, and much else besides, as the rich soil from which our individual commitments and voluntary associations grow. Harriss (2004) draws on Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to argue that each forms

³³⁴ Amos 8: 4-7.

³³⁵ Czech Trade Inspection Authority, History of consumer rights protection. <https://coi.gov.cz/en/about-ctia/history-of-consumer-rights-protection/>

³³⁶ The timeline runs broadly from the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill (1970), to The Disability Discrimination Act (1995), then ratification by the UK Government of United Nations Convention on the Rights of people with disabilities and passes the Single Equality Act (2010).

³³⁷ In the UK, gay relationships were illegal until 1967 when they were decriminalised for men over twenty-one provided they conducted were private. The overall narrative then changed from de-criminalisation to the demand for rights and following constant pressure, individuals were granted the same right as others to enter the armed forces, engage in civil partnerships and to marry and adopt children.

a distinctive attitude to civil society on the one hand comprising emotionality that inflames commitment and inspires connection and loyalty to others, versus an abstract rational individuality for whom social relations are a matter of choice.³³⁸ Harris argues that both models are ideal types that are latent in all political contexts. However, given the general loss of *gemeinschaft*, “Whenever civil society attempted to mobilize principles of altruism, civil solidarity and individual ‘public spirit’, what was really being observed was either a cosmetic exercise, or a rearguard action by the proponents of community trying to soften the impact of unlimited competition.”³³⁹

Once of the most powerful institutions in the land, the Christian Churches have played a prominent role in orchestrating campaigns for social justice in the USA and the UK through the years, by founding charities for social relief, organising single-issue campaigns against the activities of delinquent businesses, and establishing the Fair-Trade and Eco-church movements. As international organizations with bases in almost every region and country the churches are able to draw on extensive and well-established intelligence networks to support their campaigns. There are obvious differences within and between Churches ranging from those that enthusiastically espouse liberal market principles to highly critical views such as those expressed by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020)³⁴⁰. Catholic social teaching advocates a life of simplicity and detachment from material possessions and concern for climate justice, the poor and for immigrants. On the other hand Adam Smith had famously argued that one should bracket one’s responsibility, by placing one’s natural sympathy to one side when exchanging goods in the marketplace, followed in true form by the Puritan character described by Max Weber, who felt duty bound to accumulate wealth as evidence of divine patronage and predestined glory. Protestant evangelicals today have adopted a varied set of positions towards the market.³⁴¹

Women have long formed the backbone of church campaigns and been actively engaged in reform movements for worker and consumer rights. For instance, in the United States, Jane Addams co-founder of the National Consumer League (1899) was at one time a seminarian, and her friend Florence Kelley, who campaigned vigorously against sweatshops was raised as a Quaker. Maclachlan and Trentmann (2004), describe how the campaigns conducted by the NCL were more expansive than those of their British counterparts who subscribed to a free trade ideology and focused narrowly on price to the exclusion of product safety, product quality and labour conditions, even tolerating the continuing legal sale of milk infected with tuberculosis until just before the First World War.³⁴² In contrast, the NCL were concerned more broadly with how consumer

³³⁸ Harris, (2004, 137).

³³⁹ Ibid., 142.

³⁴⁰ Pope Francis, (2020). *Fratelli Tutti; Encyclical letter on fraternity and social fellowship*. The Holy See.

³⁴¹ Daniel Williams’ summary of a number of books from evangelicals makes for interesting reading. Williams, D. (2011). Evangelical economics; Re-examining Christian political culture from a marketplace perspective. *Reviews in American History*, 39(1), 175-184.

³⁴² Ibid. 174-175.

purchasing power could be deployed to improve the lot of workers by drawing up whitelists of 'ethical consumption'.³⁴³ The wider concern with working conditions and sweatshop labour evident in early NCL campaigns is discussed further in chapter six in relation to the much more recent case of the campaign against child labour in Bangladesh.

Economic Liberalism

The modern free individual came to be conceived of as someone who acts rationally, in different spheres, of politics (as *homo politicus*), justice (as *homo juridicus*) and economics (as *homo economicus*) and in civil society (*homo civicus*). As described above, such conceptions did not arise spontaneously, but as a consequence of major changes that occurred in Europe from the seventeenth century onward, which ceded power from the grasp of the medieval absolute monarch and supposedly placed it in the hands of the sovereign individual. This formed part of a wholesale reconfiguration of private and state institutions in politics, justice, the media and the media. In Britain, the principal ideological force that drove this movement was liberalism, which elevated the principle of individual freedom to the supreme good.

For many neoliberals the justification for the market begins and ends with the arguments made by the eighteenth-century philosopher Adam Smith. Sir Keith Joseph, an incoming minister of Margaret Thatcher's government in 1979 urged civil servants to read *The Wealth of Nations*, as a guide to policy,³⁴⁴ and an unsubstantiated and rather unlikely claim, is that she carried a copy in her famous handbag. Whatever the truth, academic journal articles on Adam Smith increased steadily from the 1970s to the 1990s.³⁴⁵ Given how Smith is often invoked by neoliberal economists and politicians of the New Right it is important to outline some basic differences between what they claim and what he wrote.

Adam Smith's arguments for market liberalism must be understood against the reality of the mercantile system of his day, which involved a one-sided exploitative relationship with

³⁴³ MacLachlan and Trentmann (2004, 178) mention that the focus on legal rights by consumer activists was a distinctively American phenomenon, dating back to the War of Independence which in the 1920s and 1930s involved the NCL in campaigning against denial of rights for blacks and low wages for whites.

³⁴⁴ Hershey, R.D. Jr., (1979). Mrs Thatcher's Right Wing Guru, *New York Times*, 20th May: 7.

³⁴⁵ Wight, J.B., (2002). The rise of Adam Smith: articles and citations 1970-1997. *History of Political Economy*, vol. 34(1): 55-82.

dependent colonies,³⁴⁶ and flagrant disregard for human lives³⁴⁷, coupled with restricted competition between producers, and a cosy accommodation between them and policy makers.³⁴⁸ Smith railed against the common connivance between producers to increase prices, particularly during periods of shortage, and their exploitation of workers whom they denied the opportunities for joint action that they themselves availed of. One of the most recognisable quotes from Smith is his assertion that,

He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens.³⁴⁹

Smith's approach to the market may better be understood in relation to his earlier argument in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* – and indeed in its last edition, where he argued that the human capacity for sympathy enables us to judge our actions from the perspective of others. By developing an argument based on the capacity for sympathy and the role of the impartial spectator that enables us to view our conduct from a third-person perspective, Smith did away with the idea that human conduct needs to be controlled by a Leviathan or managed in a top-down manner by instilling moral rules. In a similar bottom-up process as that applied to the operation of the market, Smith had argued that just outcomes can arise seemingly spontaneously in interaction, through the approbation and dis-approbation of others, as for instance when children learn about the norm of reciprocity in gift relations which is an obligation that is readily understandable and is quickly learned by seeming to arise spontaneously.

In a statement that would no doubt be roundly endorsed by marketers today, Smith remarked that, “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the

³⁴⁶ Smith had a less rosy view of mercantilism that did Defoe, described by Tadjewski, (2015). “The function of the colonies was to inexpensive raw materials and purchase expensive finished goods; the role of the mother country to turn one into the other.” (Norman, 2018: 90).

³⁴⁷ In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith contrasts the relative good fortune of the American colonies to the East Indies, which “was a fertile country...where subsistence should not be very difficult, where notwithstanding, three or four hundred thousand people die of hunger in one year through the actions of the East India Company. From chapter 8, Of the Wages of Labour, Book I, *The Wealth of Nations*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h#chap15>

Smith later contends that, “the monopoly of the colony trade, therefore, like all the other mean and malignant expedients of the mercantile system, depresses the industry of all other countries, but chiefly that of the colonies, without in the least increasing, but on the contrary diminishing, that of the country in whose favour it is established.” Chapter 7: Of Colonies, Part II: Book IV, Causes of prosperity of New Colonies, *Wealth of Nations*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h#chap15>

³⁴⁸ Norman (2018: 243) links mercantilism to today's “crony capitalism” as both involve, “political lobbying, anti-competitive regulation, egregious financial returns, growing inequality and loss of public trust”.

³⁴⁹ From chapter 2, Of the Principle which gives occasion to the division of labour, Book I, *The Wealth of Nations*, Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h#chap15>

interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer”, is so obvious that “it would be absurd to try to prove it”. This comment was directed at collusive mercantile interests where, “the interest of the consumer is almost constantly sacrificed to that of the producer; and it seems to consider production, and not consumption, as the ultimate end and object of all industry and commerce.”³⁵⁰

For Smith the market is not just an economic but a social relation that offers individual emancipation from a form of political oppression, by acting as the means to curb the, “ingrained habits of subordination and deference by recasting social relations in a market context of liberty rather than of servile dependency”.³⁵¹ In the strict hierarchy of the feudal era the relation of the peasant to the local lord was one of servility, given that they were almost entirely dependent on his grace and favour for their livelihood, protection from violence and for adjudicating disputes. The growing market chipped away at this dependent relation by creating a horizontal system based on free interaction between strangers. Market exchanges based on mutual agreement also presumed an equal relation between buyer and seller. The spread of markets thus allowed individuals a form of independence or at least an end to dependency.³⁵²

Norman argues that the linked developments of the market system and the corporation led to an upsurge in economic development, wealth and social progress unparalleled in human history. Looking back to the period between 1500 and 1800, McCloskey (2010; 2016) argues that Smith paid too much heed to capital accumulation and insufficient attention to the innovative and creative role played by the rising bourgeois class in contributing to what he calls the Great Enrichment. For McCloskey this fundamental change in the social order ushered in a period of “new liberty and dignity for commoners”.

David Graeber suggests that Smith got a little ahead of himself, given that at the time he wrote given there was no cash, transactions were usually conducted on credit and accounts were settled after a period of time. Graeber warns of potential western ethnocentrism in that it is likely that Smith’s argument was influenced by Islamic scholars, from whom his example of the division of labour arises (Graeber, 2011: 279). Before Smith, these scholars had argued that markets develop because each individual is incapable of attending to all of her various needs by furnishing herself with housing, clothing, food, utensils and so forth, but in contrast to Smith, who justified the market on the basis of the pursuit of individual self-interest, they argued the need for aid and justice in exchange relations. Whilst Smith made clear that in the marketplace the butcher and the baker should look to their own self-interest and that exercising benevolence is against the will of Providence, in contrast, the essence of the market for these Muslim writers was not competition but cooperation and mutual aid.

³⁵⁰ From chapter 8: Conclusion of the mercantile system. Book IV: Principles of political economy, *The Wealth of Nations*, Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h#chap15>

³⁵¹ Norman, (2018, 243).

³⁵² Satz, (2010, 43).

Homo Economicus

John Stuart Mill realised Adam Smith's arguments in the fictional figure of homo economicus.³⁵³ His aim to provide a "straw man" for economic theory against which to test more realistic accounts of the human decision maker was more fully developed by neoclassical economists such as, Jevons, Edgeworth, Walras and Pareto. These economists also formulated the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility by which consumer satisfaction is presumed to decrease with each additional unit consumed. O'Boyle succinctly captures the nub of this when stating that, "characterized as *homo economicus* the consumer is unique, solitary, autonomous, self-centred and self-made".³⁵⁴ The student of Management 101 ought to be familiar with this ideal conception of the actor in the marketplace whose aim is to maximise his satisfaction by optimising his assortment of goods, acting rationally, using perfect information to judge alternative offerings from a wide number of sellers against pre-specified preferences, calculating their respective contribution to the satisfaction they provide and choosing the option that provides the optimum satisfaction. This model also assumes the existence of perfect competition between sellers.

Democracy and Capitalism: A Marriage made in Heaven?

A liberal theorist ought to worry when an article in a major business journal questions whether capitalism and democracy need each other. So, when a number of top economists in a premier business journal did so it was time to sit up and take notice. Political theorist Robert Dahl had argued that capitalism is the economic system most compatible with polyarchy as it has fuelled long-term market growth which is favourable democracy by cutting poverty and raising living standards.³⁵⁵ In his account the market offers a more efficient means for resource allocation than does a distributive system based on central planning and secondly, because its relentless quest for growth helps build prosperity, it enables the rise of a substantial, well-informed middle-class that in turn provides political stability, by buying into democratic values and striving for consensus.³⁵⁶

Early in his career Dahl had generally argued against government intervention in the market on the grounds that this affects the operation of the price mechanism which he believed allocates resources better than alternatives (Swanson, 2007). He later adopted a more critical tone to argue that capitalism and democracy are locked into a conflict where

³⁵³ See, O'Boyle, (2007: 322); Starr, (2007). The earliest use of *homo economicus* was not by Mill but in 1883, when C. S. Devas in *Groundwork of Economics*, argued that 'Mill has only explored homoeoeconomicus, or dollar-hunting animal'. From Charles Devas, *Groundwork of Economics*. OED.

³⁵⁴ O'Boyle, (2007: 329).

³⁵⁵ Dahl, (1998, 167). This is similar in tone to Hayek's justification for the market based on how a city comes to be fed every day without external intervention.

³⁵⁶ Martin Wolf also argues that despite their differences capitalism and democracy are compatible because they each rest on the principle of human agency; in capitalism the power of producers is ultimately reined in by the choices of a myriad individual consumers, whilst in democracy the power of the citizen exercised through the ballot box keeps the power politicians in check (Wolf, 2024).

one limits the other.³⁵⁷ Capitalism may bring gains for firms, which are, ‘virtually managerial despotisms’, and for their owners, but these gains are shared unequally and additionally capitalism harms many others. Regulations are required, firstly, because competitive markets cannot be self-regulating and require for their effective operation an entire infrastructure of policies, laws, policies, and other action by government; and secondly, otherwise, if left alone markets will inflict ‘serious harm’ on some individuals, because ‘economic actors motivated by self-interest have little incentive for taking the good of others into account’.³⁵⁸ In relation to the rapid and seemingly successful development of capitalism in China, Dahl argued that this might well work in the short term, but that in the long run the problems associated with a ruling oligarchy will come to the fore.

Several of those contributing to the *Harvard Business Review* article argue that the first of the propositions advanced by Dahl in favour of capitalism, which is that it provides an engine for prosperity, has recently failed to deliver in the West. In relation to this Isabel Sawhill mentions long run stagnation in real wages, the reduction of once prosperous industrial centres to rustbelts, and their impoverished citizens to blank victims of opioid abuse.

The collapse in political equality against the economic inequality produced by capitalism is another theme, in relation to which Isabelle Ferreras, In a similar vein to the later argument of Robert Dahl, argued the urgent need to institute workplace democracy, ‘or forfeit our democratic rights to those who own capital’. Reetika Khera worries about crony capitalism and corporate capture of political institutions, that capitalism does not need real democracy but rather a simulacrum today which is a charade that consolidates plutocracy.

While several of the contributors argue that capitalism can thrive within any system of political organization, Manuel Agosin qualifies this to argue that while capitalism can happily develop for some time without democracy, autocracies and oligarchies tend to reward loyalty, back-scratching and corruption, over capability and probity, while noting that corruption can also feature in democracies! However Steve Klein cautions that while in the short term as in China, capitalism does not need democracy, in the long term it does, to save it from its own excesses.

Michael Wolf (2024) shares Robert Dahl’s belief that capitalism and democracy can work in concert as democracy acts to curb the excesses of capitalism which in turn provides a check on self-serving behaviour amongst politicians. Individual freedom of choice is common to both, acting in the capitalist economy to spur competition and in the polity, through the ballot box to determine who gets to rule and for how long. However, as he sees it this fragile balance has since gone awry and he recommends actions to restore it including the need for transparency, better taxation and regulation of business and for firms to recognize their social responsibilities.

³⁵⁷ Dahl, (1998, 173-175).

³⁵⁸ Ibid. 174.

Colin Kidd (2024) adopts a more sombre tone by suggesting that the marriage between capitalism and democracy was a fortuitous blip that owed much to circumstance, brought together when a brief window opened just after the Second World War, when in the West men returning to work in mining and heavy industry from war, where they had plenty of time to ruminate, used their collective clout to demand and get a fairer and more egalitarian social order. In Kidd's view it was not democracy but a series of circumstances that conjoined war, labour and patriarchy that once combined to bring capitalism and democracy to heel. These conditions no longer apply as patriarchy has since been emasculated as a social force and labour can no longer act as a bulwark for democracy against capitalism, as the once mighty armies that strode into the shipyards, steel-works and factories are no more and future jobs will be fewer and different.

Part Two: Neoliberalism

While like a mycelium, market logic has penetrated virtually every aspect of life today, it is complex, consisting of a number of modalities. Neoliberalism can be thought of as an era in global capitalism; as a bunch of theories that came to inform a governing rationale that all human life can be explained in terms of economic freedom and rationality; as a new form of subjectivity based on principles of homo economicus enacted and implemented in policies that have had determinate effects on real people on the ground, who complied with or resisted them and sometimes did both.³⁵⁹ Below I first briefly address the question of subjectivity before discussing neoliberal schools of thought on the economy.

In one of his later seminars Foucault described neoliberalism as the period when a change in capitalism evoked a related change in the conception of the subject, not only in the realm of ideas but as reflected in policies devised to incentivise the individual as a self-responsible entrepreneur and steward of their human capital.³⁶⁰ Casting a wider net one might consider that a model for the subject described by Foucault emerged from the unruly individualist youth counterculture that erupted across the USA and Europe in the early 1960s, much to the astonishment and chagrin of intellectuals, to challenge corporatism, the war machine and the stifling conformity and perceived hypocrisy of society (i.e. parents).³⁶¹ Nancy Fraser argues that 'under the cover of this artistic critique' capital launched its own rebellion against the high level of taxation,³⁶² leading to what she refers to as a 'counterintuitive convergence of forces' comprising on the one hand, movements descended from the New Left seeking emancipation from, 'racism, imperialism and sexism...consumerism, familialism and bureaucratic paternalism' and on the other, of 'an ascending 'neoliberal' party of free marketeers, intent on unshackling free market forces.'³⁶³ While the distinction she makes between emancipators and free

³⁵⁹ Wendy Brown, (2015) speaks of different modalities with which one can engaged with neoliberalism. In an interview Quinn Slobodian mentioned that one can frame neoliberalism in a number of ways; as an era in global capitalism; as a policy package linked to the "Washington consensus"; as a form of subjectivity; or as an intellectual movement. He contrasted his approach which focuses on the 'supply' side (Slobodian, 2025) with that of Perry Anderson (2025).

³⁶⁰ Foucault, (2008).

³⁶¹ See Roszak, (1969) who memorably wrote that at the time the enemy was on the other side of the table. Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) loftily refer to this revolt as an 'artistic critique'.

³⁶² One can forget that capital also includes the culture industries. The top rate of personal taxation in the UK in the 1960s was 90% and if you listen to track one, side one of *Revolver* (1966) you might possibly detect a hint of chagrin in the tone of these lovable countercultural capitalists.

³⁶³ Quotes from Sally Fraser in Fraser & Jaeggi, (2018, 85, 86). I don't agree entirely with this line of argument as this was also a time when anti-business sentiment was at its highest, when consumer interest groups were formed and business regulation enforced. See chapter three.

marketers is perhaps too hard-edged,³⁶⁴ Fraser's argument concerning the development of a "progressive neoliberalism" that steadily removed the social protection of the old order of state managed capitalism is convincing. The old order was not so much eroded as dismantled by individuals who were motivated by greed as much as by self-interest. Although Margaret Thatcher seems genuinely to have believed in the creation of a "shareholder democracy", her policy of selling publicly owned enterprises appealed to the opportunism of those with ready cash who knew a sure-fire bet when they saw one, as did tenants of council houses who bought their properties at knock-down rates, becoming mini-capitalists in the process.

Neo-Liberal Schools of Thought

Almost three centuries after Smith wrote his famous text, his core arguments were refurbished and reinvigorated by European ordoliberals such as Friedrich von Hayek and by American neoliberals of the Chicago School such as Milton Friedman, Ronald Coase and Gary Becker. These movements arose as a reaction against the influence of John Maynard Keynes, whose advocacy of government intervention into the market had gained traction before the Second World War. While ordoliberals and neoliberals were collectively labelled as the New Right, there are important differences between these schools of thought. The American neoliberals are generally associated with the Chicago School of Economics, which holds that markets are spontaneous, arising naturally and that when market forces are left to themselves, they result in an equilibrium, optimum allocation of resources. While the ordoliberals also generally believed in curtailing the power of the State, they argued that markets are artificial constructs created by government and so government should play a role in ensuring that the marketplace remains competitive. The following discussion focuses on neoliberalism.

The Chicago School

Although originally conceived of as a model of ideal economic behaviour, the concept of homo economicus hardened from the early 1970s onwards such that it came to be assumed that consumers actually do act rationally, know their preferences and maximise their satisfaction. This ideal character is the model of perfection, being perfectly rational, equipped with a fully developed and transitive set of preferences and with perfect information to discover market offerings, and possessed of the requisite numeracy to choose that alternative from an assortment that maximises their utility.

This fiction of the perfectly rational individual was bolstered by arguments that markets are always efficient as prevailing asset prices in capital markets fully reflect all available

³⁶⁴ While acknowledging the hard struggle for racial equality in the 1960s which continues today, in *The Rebel Sell*, Heath and Potter (2004) make the point that the youth culture of individualism, anti-authoritarianism and non-conformism was also steeped in commodity culture which it remade. There is an interesting psychological literature on how radicals from one stripe might flip to the other (Zmigrod et al., 2020). The life story of Jerry Rubin, founder of the Yippies is a case in point. See, Pace, E. (1994). Jerry Rubin 56, Flashy 60's Radical, Dies; 'Yippies' Founder and Chicago 7 Defendant. *New York Times*, 30th November.

information, and that markets naturally come into equilibrium.³⁶⁵ Neoliberal economists from the Chicago School played a central role in shaping political policy in the West from the 1970s and globally, since the 1990s. In relation to the economy neoliberals argue for free trade, lack of protectionism, low taxation, low government regulation (or “red tape” as it is dismissively referred to) and low government spending. The core idea is that the market should be given free-rein and the state should be kept as small as possible, as the former is the most, and the latter the least, efficient means to allocate scarce resources. For instance, Coase (1960) focused on the State to argue that regulatory interventions can in certain circumstances lead to less efficient outcomes than will be achieved through the market.

The influence of such arguments on regulatory policy in the neoliberal era is evident in much of the literature which describes industry regulation by government as coercive and authoritarian. In the USA, the fifty years and more since Ronald Reagan came to power, has witnessed widespread deregulation across a wide range of industries. As a consequence, corporations have since been largely left to make up their own rules and to police themselves, setting their own standards and monitoring their own compliance.³⁶⁶

The formal proof of general equilibrium theory demonstrated by Arrow and Debreu (1954) seemingly provided a strong basis for laissez-faire. This provided mathematical proof of a set of prices at which the quantities supplied and demanded can be simultaneously the same across all markets and was used as justification that order can arise from the seeming chaos of billions of decisions made across markets, by individuals pursuing their rational self-interest. In another of the most important papers published in economics, Robert Lucas (1972) developed the Rational Expectations Hypothesis (REH), which undermined the rather jaundiced Keynesian view of homo economicus as, ‘myopic, impulsive, gullible and sometimes just dumb’.³⁶⁷

When Lucas wrote, the accepted wisdom had been that government should manipulate the economy by means of Keynesian-style interventions such as to increase inflation with the aim of cutting unemployment. Lucas’s basic argument was that such interventions are ill-advised, because most individuals will learn from government actions by forming rational expectations of what to expect and will then adjust their behaviour accordingly. From this perspective, government intervention to increase the money supply in a bid to accelerate economic growth will be counterproductive, as it will lead to a spiral, as workers increase their wage demands and businesses respond by raising prices. Lucas’s mathematically rigorous approach advocated that macroeconomic policy should be based on a fully specified model which should take into account the micro-foundations of economic behaviour by assuming that consumers will optimize their assortments on the basis of rational expectations.

³⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that today the much lauded “efficient market hypothesis” is now challenged by the “inelastic markets hypothesis” (Gabaix & Koijen, 2021).

³⁶⁶ Hathaway, (2020).

³⁶⁷ Mann, G. (2023). Keynesianism in a foxhole. *London Review of Books*, vol. 45(8): 35.

Some argue that the fact that governments and central banks were highly receptive to Lucas's critique, which quickly became orthodoxy, was not simply because of its efficacy. Although the Chicago economists rejected the view that they were motivated by political concerns, the conclusions reached by rational expectations theory, that governments should steer clear of market intervention and that intervention by central banks could never reduce unemployment but would raise inflation was music to the ears of bankers and business leaders of the Thatcher and Reagan periods.³⁶⁸

Gary Becker, perhaps the most influential of all the Chicago economists, is best known for stretching the underlying principles of *homo economicus* to cover areas previously considered beyond the Pale, such as, racial discrimination, crime, addiction, the family, social care, health and education. For instance, he was the first to argue that the main benefit of education is to raise income³⁶⁹, arguing also that the best way in which to reduce the size of a given population is to educate girls so that they will have higher wages in adulthood. Becker explained criminal behaviour as a rational decision involving a trade-off between costs and benefits. Becker's argument is particularly noteworthy for introducing the idea that the individual is the steward of their own capital and the consumer is the producer of her own satisfaction, such that for instance, when I subscribe to Spotify, I produce my own pleasure from music. Becker rejected the definition of rationality as consisting of reasonable behaviour that is in tune with reality, to argue that it is, "maximization of a well-ordered function, such as a profit or utility function".³⁷⁰ In his view rational behaviour is logically coherent, whether or not it is reasonable, and so behaviour can be judged rational if the consumer has a consistent plan to maximise utility, or satisfaction, over time. This point is discussed further in chapter five.

From Heuristics and Biases to Behavioural Economics

A different story describes how the assumptions underpinning *homo economicus* were increasingly subjected to scrutiny and progressively undermined by insights gained through the empirical research programmes into the behaviour of real consumers conducted by psychologists such as Herbert Simon, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, and the economist, Richard Thaler. Herbert Simon was the first psychologist to critically evaluate the extent to which the fiction of *homo economicus* provides an accurate description of actual human decision behaviour. Simon was responding to the influential paper published by Von Neuman and Morgenstern (1944) who developed the concept of Subjective Expected Utility (SEU), which defines the conditions of perfect utility-maximising rationality in a world of certainty, in which *homo economicus* is aware of the probability distributions of all relevant variables, has a well-defined utility function and when presented with a defined set of alternatives, can assign a consistent joint probability. Simon explored the differences between this idealised conception proposed by SEU theory, in which the consumer is assumed to behave in a rationally

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 33.

³⁶⁹ Becker & Chiswick, (1966).

³⁷⁰ Becker, (1962).

comprehensive manner by considering all outcomes, and real consumer behaviour.³⁷¹ One of his key contributions was to envisage decision-making as a form of problem-solving, where a problem comprises an initial state, goal state, operators and operator restrictions.³⁷² Simon found that real individuals do not engage in rational comprehensive decision-making but rather employ means-end analysis as a heuristic, or rule of thumb. Once one has formed an objective, rather than exploring every avenue and solving the entire problem in one go, humans, because of our limited cognitive system, will first split a problem down into manageable sub-problems. Simon argued that due to limited random processing capacity, human rationality is not comprehensive but bounded, and that rather than optimizing, real humans satisfice, by accepting the most satisfactory outcome.

Rational choice theorists found it relatively easy to ignore Simon's findings, partly because he had not "fleshed out" the differences between full rationality and bounded rationality.³⁷³ Comparison between real-life decision-making processes and *homo economicus* was taken up in a landmark paper by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1974) where the authors provided evidence that individuals systematically employ heuristics which lead to consistently biased outcomes resulting in poor choices. They reported on now well-known heuristics such as anchoring and adjustment, where a person's subsequent evaluation is based on arbitrary initial information; loss aversion, the tendency to weight losses more heavily than gains; and confirmation bias, which is the tendency to mould evidence to one's pre-existing beliefs and seemed to offer convincing evidence that in contrast to *homo economicus*, humans do not reason comprehensively in the manner assumed and that even experts are poor statisticians who resort to heuristics, or broad rules of thumb when making decisions.

Despite offering what to many was convincing evidence, it was relatively easy for classical economists to ignore the findings of Tversky and Kahneman. However it was a different matter when Richard Thaler who was one of their own took up the gauntlet. Thaler (1980) broke the mould to argue that fellow economists should take the findings from prospect theory into account to construct a realistically descriptive theory of economics. Such was the grip of Lucas's mathematical deductive rational expectations approach on academics in the USA, that some worried if Thaler, who would eventually win the Nobel Prize, would ever be granted tenure.³⁷⁴ However the framework developed by Tversky and Kahneman provided sufficient purchase for Thaler to gain a foothold by arguing convincingly that in

³⁷¹ Simon, (1957); Newell & Simon, (1958; 1972).

³⁷² The problem-solving terminology of initial state, goal state, operators and operator restrictions translates in the organisational context as audit, mission, objectives strategies and tactics.

³⁷³ Thaler, (2015: 29)

³⁷⁴ Kaletsky, A., (2009). *Goodbye Homo Economicus*. Prospect, 25th April. Mentions that David Hendry, until recently head of the Oxford economics department, noted that: "Economists critical of the rational expectations based approach have had great difficulty even publishing such views, or maintaining research funding <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/52872/goodbye-homo-economicus>. See also Cassidy's (2017) interview with Kahneman where the latter admitted that he wondered if Thaler would ever get tenure. Ironically, despite the objections of several academics, Thaler later took up a position at the University of Chicago.

certain situations consumers fail to act in the ways prescribed by neoclassical economic theory. For example, the endowment effect, that individuals demand more to give up an object they already own than they are willing to acquire a new one, derives from earlier observations on loss-aversion. Thaler's pithy comparison of the theoretical choices made by "econs"³⁷⁵ and real-life humans was clearcut and comprehensible to many.³⁷⁶ These differences led Thaler and Sunstein to call for liberal paternalism which is consistent with a civic republican position, in which the state and other institutions effect policies to "nudge" consumers to make decisions that serve their long-term interests and in the interests of society.³⁷⁷

To describe the contest between the Chicago School and behavioural economists such as Thaler as a struggle between equals is misleading, as, despite the fairly recent proliferation of "nudge" units in government circles, the Chicago School narrative dominated discourse for almost fifty years.³⁷⁸ While professing their independence from politics, the ideas of the Chicago School have been proselytized since the 1970s by politicians associated with the New Right. Since then, the precept of individual freedom of choice has dominated political rhetoric and as we shall see, has since become deeply embedded into the fabric of everyday life.

While obviously a theoretical abstraction, homo economicus has been assumed to be real by policymakers who have elided key differences between it and the behaviour of real humans, such that it is still argued that this fiction is the *only* way to understand economic and organizational behaviour.³⁷⁹ The persistence of retaining this fiction recalls the marginal status and relative powerlessness of consumer researchers and their complaints that nobody who matters in policy formation seems bothered to acquaint themselves with the extensive literature from this perspective which often paints a different picture to that of the atomistic individual who maximises the satisfaction of their preferences.³⁸⁰ It is worth noting that the Austrian School of economics also offers an alternative conception of the economic subject that is more conducive to cultural theorists, by adopting an interpretive account that emphasizes social construction, subjective value and limited knowledge.³⁸¹

³⁷⁵ Sunstein & Thaler, (2008).

³⁷⁶ Kahneman, Knetsch & Thaler. (1991).

³⁷⁷ Thaler & Sunstein, (2003).

³⁷⁸ See Lazear, (2015). That there is no love lost between these two groups is testified to by Thaler (2016), who describes how neoliberals refused to acknowledge insights from psychology by questioning its evidential basis and that individuals behaved differently in competitive market situations. Tversky and Kahneman have been criticized by Gigerenzer on the methodological ground that their test of rationality was based on Bayesian inference, which humans are not very good at, (Gigerenzer, & Hoffrage, 1995) rather than on frequencies, which they are good at (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996), such that humans are good intuitive statisticians who employ fast and frugal heuristics.

³⁷⁹ Melé D. & Cantón (2014).

³⁸⁰ As mentioned in chapter three, consumer researchers have long described differences between the idealised homo economicus and real consumer behaviour – see also Bevir and Trentmann, (2007, 2).

³⁸¹ Slobodian, (2025, 43-45).

Ordoliberalism

The school of ordoliberalism founded by Ludwig von Mises has been influential in Germany, the UK and the USA, particularly through the subsequent development by his student Friedrich Hayek. Mises who fled Nazi Germany in 1940 developed ordoliberalism as a response to his experience of the totalitarian state, a monstrous and inhuman formation that supposedly represented the voice of the “people” and elevated beyond individual ethics “as the highest guiding principle on earth”.³⁸² While accepting that, one might suggest that it would be a bit rich to compare the diabolical Nazi state to the welfare states which developed in liberal democracies under state capitalism, given the latter development aimed to protect, not destroy, the vulnerable. Hayek made no such argument and indeed supported the idea that there should be some form of safety net for the poor. He arrived in Britain in 1938 and published *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944, which proved influential, particularly after it was circulated in annotated form by the *Reader's Digest*.

In brief, Hayek's argument was aimed against the continuation of attempts to plan the economy which had operated well in wartime at a period of relative social solidarity when rationing was generally accepted as an equitable means to distribute scarce resources. While some had argued for the continuance of planning in peacetime, Hayek contended that by vesting too much power in the state bureaucracy, such a system would not only be cumbersome but would lead to a slippery slope towards authoritarian rule. As is often the case, many readers were struck by the force of one simple example. Consider that you want to consider the best way to feed the population of a city. While some might argue for a central planner acting as a food czar, Hayek countered with the argument that given its huge complexity, no single individual can have an adequate understanding of the food system. As he explained it, how cities operate to feed their citizens daily in the absence of central controls is down to the informational role of the price system that acts to coordinate the actions of a myriad individual suppliers and their customers.

Anarcho-Capitalism

The standout figures of anarcho-capitalism are Murray Rothbard and Hans-Hermann Hoppe. Although influenced by von Mises they departed radically from his arguments particularly on race, by forging an explanation that is especially conducive to the ears of some white US Americans by adopting a radical understanding of liberty that prizes difference over all else, that sees racial difference as rooted in biology, and so is dead set against equality in all its forms, perceiving democracy and the institutions of the nation-state as barriers to the operation of the market.³⁸³

Below I draw mainly from one text to illustrate how anarcho-capitalism is in many respects a peculiarly American phenomenon. As the founder of anarcho-capitalism, Rothbard was influenced by H.L. Mencken's absolutist notion of negative liberty for whom, “All government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man: its' one

³⁸² Eichmann in Stangeth, 2014: 217.

³⁸³ Slobodian (2006, 183).

permanent object is to oppress him and cripple him. The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself.³⁸⁴ Antipathy towards bigness is also apparent in Mencken's assignment of blame on big business for the growth of the 'monopoly statism' of the 1920s, he described as a "fascistic cartelization".³⁸⁵ Rothbard's extreme antipathy to centralised authority was evidenced in his call for the abolition of all government its substitution by market transactions such that public services from rubbish collection to personal security would be privatised on a contractual basis.

Rothbard mentions that it was in the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), mainly composed of small business, that the dedicated conspiracy theorist Robert Welch learned the anti-establishment views that led to him forming the right-wing John Birch Society³⁸⁶, which is noteworthy, given the unprecedented size and power of big business today. Although an antipathy towards bigness is a common theme, anarcho-capitalism spans a much wider set of concerns. In his introduction to Rothbard (2007), a fellow-traveller, argued that the Old Right was bound by a virulent hatred of 'the whole kit and kaboodle' of Roosevelt's New Deal, unionisation, the welfare state, and especially taxation, described as sheer robbery and "that mighty instrument of tyranny".³⁸⁷ The abolition of the Gold Standard in 1933 lives long and looms large in the anarcho-capitalist imagination, partly explaining Rothbard's fallout with Milton Friedman, with whom he once had cordial relations. Rothbard later subjected Friedman to a stinging critique, arguing that monetarist policy is, 'almost the exact reverse of the sound — as well as truly free-market — Austrian view'... and that even worse, Friedman's mentor Irving Fisher had advocated to get rid of the Gold Standard"³⁸⁸. The New Deal was, "a fascistic government upon the economy and society, with a Bigness far worse than Theodore Roosevelt".³⁸⁹ That said Rothbard shared Friedman's view that the only aim of business should be to make a profit, mentioning a chapter by Isabel Patterson that in his view had the greatest impact on libertarians entitled, "The Humanitarian with the Guillotine," which in his view was 'a brilliant critique of do-gooding and its consequence' linked to, "welfarism, parasitism and coercion".³⁹⁰

Rothbard describes how extreme right-wing Republicans attacked the military and US expansionism, arguing against conscription, NATO, and the Truman Doctrine.³⁹¹ He proudly describes Howard Buffet, better known today as the father of Warren Buffet as,

³⁸⁴ Mencken in Rothbard,(2007, 13).

³⁸⁵ Rothbard, (2007, 17/18).

³⁸⁶ Rothbard, (2007, 117).

³⁸⁷ T. Woods Jr., (Rothbard, 2007, xii).

³⁸⁸ See section on Friedman on Money, in, Rothbard, Murray N., (2002). Milton Friedman Unraveled. *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 16(4), 37–54.

³⁸⁹ Rothbard, (2007, 23).

³⁹⁰ Rothbard, (2007, 60).

³⁹¹ Rothbard, (2007, 87).

‘one of the most extreme of the extremists.’³⁹² The rationale for this anti-war stance seems to have been based on a mixture of pragmatism and the preservation of individual liberty rather than on moral grounds. For Rothbard, “Even if it were desirable, America is not strong enough to police the world by military force” and he worried that a large military could pose a threat to individual liberty as it could be used for state repression.³⁹³ He called for a “libertarian” basis for an ‘isolationist and peaceful foreign policy ‘ and for withdrawal from NATO and the UN.³⁹⁴

There are undercurrents of racism, as in the foreword, where Woods Jr. expresses his preference to, ‘reintroduce the “good old” Articles of Confederation³⁹⁵ and of anti-semiticism in Rothbard’s defence of Charles Lindbergh, who had also argued against the USA joining the war in Europe in 1941. Interestingly, in light of its more recent usage he also mentions that as a consequence of the furore over Lindbergh, the organisation *America First* was almost dissolved.³⁹⁶

Neoliberal Policies

Mainly influenced by the Chicago School, neoliberal policies aimed to create an economy based on enterprise, and to stimulate investment and growth by cutting direct taxes, deregulating labour and reducing welfare. A related aim was to create a shareholder democracy by issuing shares from the privatisation of state assets. Additionally, state services either outsourced or were subjected to market “discipline” through the formation of quasi markets. Writ large, the application of neoliberal policies to international trade involved the globalization of “market civilization”.³⁹⁷ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, industries once considered strategic, as relating to the national interest such as defence, steel, shipbuilding and agriculture, were now set “free” to compete in international markets. The wave of globalization in the 1990s was celebrated by modernization theorists for its promotion of a diverse palette of fashions, tastes and representations of community within countries, involving shedding of narrow conceptions of identity (roast beef) to embrace new inclusive identities that celebrated difference (chicken biriani).

The Neoliberal State

The new governance is the name given to the remoulded state operation following neoliberal reforms which transformed it from a hierarchical bureaucracy to a more dispersed arrangement involving quasi-markets. This change involved a shift in from direct command to steerage of policy as top-down bureaucracies were replaced by more

³⁹² Rothbard, (2007, 88).

³⁹³ Rothbard, (2007, 88).

³⁹⁴ Rothbard, (2007, 131).

³⁹⁵ T. Woods Jr., in Rothbard, 2007, xiii).

³⁹⁶ Rothbard, 2007, 43-45).

³⁹⁷ Gill, (1995).

distributed arrangements involving agents with delegated authority operating at a remove from direct government.³⁹⁸ The new arrangement was complex and assumed a number of configurations in different national contexts.

Ubiquitous, Unlimited Markets

From the above, neoliberal theorists proclaimed firstly that markets, when allowed to operate free of government interference, can provide the most efficient outcomes and secondly, for the expansion of market principles beyond the economy to areas that hitherto had been regarded as beyond the Pale. Problems that were once considered the concern of society were now laid at the door of the individual, envisaged as the steward of their own human capital; if one is poor then one can greatly enhance one's capital by going to college; parents can effectively insure against the perils of old age by catering to the needs of their children when they are young and criminals will stop committing crimes once the marginal cost of doing so exceeds the marginal benefit. Transport, health care and education previously under public ownership were transformed into quasi-markets and passengers, patients and students quickly learned that they were now customers. Charities and even churches began to see themselves if not as businesses, then as open to using social marketing techniques.

Choice

As Milton and Rose Friedman made clear in *Free to Choose* (1980), choice is central to the neoliberal conception of negative freedom and forms the background rationale for policy. The desire for negative liberty as freedom from interference and constraint imposed by authority or custom is understandable given that in many countries still the mass of the populace exercise very little freedom to do as they please or indeed to express their opinions openly. The social order was not always so hospitable and was at times openly antithetical to the very idea of individual choice. Although it seems scarcely credible, within living memory a form of egalitarianism prevailed in certain quarters in Britain where one should 'know one's place' and not get above oneself' nor 'step out of line', inviting social censure perhaps by speaking out of turn, marrying for love, or dressing inappropriately. Individual choice previously reserved for the elite began to develop in the eighteenth century, through the relatively novel idea that when provided with two or more options, an individual could be relied on to make an internal decision between them and to form their preference.³⁹⁹ The range of choices available to the individual today would thus appear staggering to someone from even fifty years ago. Nowadays the individual is notionally free to choose (or not), the food one eats, one's gender orientation or sex, sexual partner(s), preferred sexual practices, friends, religion, political orientation, media, occupation, whether or not to marry, divorce, have children and if body, which course of medical treatment to follow, and for some, which investment portfolio to buy into, or in a growing number of countries, when to choose the moment of one's death.

³⁹⁸ Bevir & Trentmann, (2007, 2).

³⁹⁹ Rosenfeld (2025), provides an illuminating account of the history of choice.

Quasi-Markets

The justification for the introduction of quasi-markets into public service provision was on the basis that efficiencies would arise from competition. In Britain in the early 1990s, although some expressed concern about the over-influence of microeconomic theory, public service purchasers in education, health and prisons began to outsource services and invite bids from private sector and voluntary providers, the idea being that the provider with the most competitive bid would be awarded the contract.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy describes the ideal that despite the accident of one's birth, the individual who shows talent in a given field, whether in business, law, politics or sport, will get their just deserts by rising to the top. Many today would find it difficult to disagree with this, given that from the 1980s governments in the UK and USA have separately and often proclaimed their ostensible commitment to destroying bastions of entitlement and to dismantle obstructions to success based on privileges of race, class and gender.⁴⁰⁰

Meritocracy is conducive to the neoliberal focus on individual difference and is linked to the notion that inequality is natural, based on the Spencerian ideal of survival of the fittest which has since percolated into every aspect of life and work envisaged as a competitive arenas where individuals vie for reward. The rarity of these apparently uniquely gifted individuals is used as justification that one must pay more for 'talent'.

Quality Assurance

A prominent characteristic of the New Right was suspicion about the perceived wastefulness of government funding in the hands of that they perceived as vested interests in the professions of health, law and the universities. These were no longer seen as the proper guardians, administrators and guarantors of their own standards but had to be subjected to a system of continuous external monitoring and review. This was interpreted by many as a regressive step as at the time of the implementation of systems such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) the prevailing consensus in industry was against quality assurance which was seen as inflexible and as producing unintended outcomes, towards a more holistic system of total quality management (TQM).⁴⁰¹

Quality assurance led to the proliferation of targets to measure performance and the publication of "league-tables" that are nowadays reported almost daily on hundreds of indicators ranging from emergency admissions to hospital to the "quality of the student

⁴⁰⁰ Margaret Thatcher was a case in point. The government of the first woman Prime Minister of the UK greatly weakened the ability for professions such as medics, academics and lawyers to regulate their own affairs. Paradoxically, although she was committed to freedom government power over these institutions was strengthened during her tenure in office. See for example, Bogdanor, V. (2013). Thatcher's academic paradox. *Times Higher Education*, 25th April). Herself a firm believer in merit and individual willpower, she did little to advance the interests of other women and was argued to have had a damaging effect on their prospects, (Stone-Lee, O. (2005). Thatcher's role for women, BBC, 22nd November).

⁴⁰¹ The full story of the demise of TQM by quality assurance which was its supposedly outmoded antecedent has yet to be told. Dayton (2004) makes a start.

experience”. The current system is by no means friction-free⁴⁰² and governments seemed to have been surprised and caught off guard to learn that individuals and institutions had begun to gamify the system in various ways that have resulted in a number of scandals health and in education.⁴⁰³

Outsourcing

A distinctive feature of neoliberalism has been the outsourcing of the provision of citizen entitlements from government to the private sector, which is described by Crane et al. (2008) as one of the three main ways in which corporations are involved in governing citizens. Outsourcing is a common feature of organization which has had a profound effect on the daily experiences of millions of individuals. Key aspects of politics such as agenda-setting and policy design have been outsourced to professional consultancies, third-sector agencies, law and accountancy firms and corporate sponsored think-tanks and businesses have been contracted on the government’s behalf to run institutions in a wide range of services dealing with health, immigration, disability assessment, social care, policing, prisons, security, transport and utilities that had hitherto been under the jurisdiction of the State.

Outsourcing is thoroughgoing, extending to functions in any organisation that are not regarded as core such as IT, cleaning, waste management and even customer service. In the UK, although governments in turn proclaim their neoliberal commitment to shrink the size of the state, say by reducing the number of civil servants, the reality is that this work has instead been contracted out to one of the major consultancies.⁴⁰⁴ The same logic applies to private organizations such as airports where passengers find that different firms are contracted to complete the baggage handling for different airlines or the UK Post Office, which contracted out the provision of its core service to Fujitsu, resulting in one of the biggest scandals of our time. One of the most persistent issues relates to the offshoring of consumer support services.⁴⁰⁵

As with their cousins in the private sector, public sector organisations have “unbundled” their operations and contracted those deemed peripheral to contractors that seem to fit fit into each other like a set of matryoshka dolls so that one must expend a great deal of time and effort to discover who is ultimately responsible. Moreover, relations between public and private sector operators are now interwoven into such a dense web such that when things go wrong, as they inevitably do it can be extremely difficult to track down

⁴⁰² A UK government review found that administrative bureaucracy for university research had increased. UK Government, (2022). *Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy*, Final Report, July. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-research-bureaucracy>. The overall cost of REF 2021 was estimated to be £471 billion, an increase Neto, a.; A. Vingre, J. D’Hont, C. Vergara, K. Farla & P. Simmonds, (2023). *REF 2021: Cost evaluation, Final Report*. https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/9184/1/REF_2021_cost_evaluation_final_report.pdf

⁴⁰³ See for example Bevin & Hood, (2006).

⁴⁰⁴ Government services contracted out to the Big Four consultancies. £2.1 to £3.4 bn. Source, Consultancy UK, (2024). *Government consultancy bill still £1 billion over pre-pandemic levels*, 30th August.

⁴⁰⁵ Grappi & Bagozzi, (2013).

any one actor on which to pin the blame, although Crane et al (2008, 57) argue that blame is now generally transferred from government onto the business that runs the service.

The Changing Face of the Corporation

Why, at a time when the corporate landscape appeared more concentrated than ever, did Gerald Davis (2016) write a book on the vanishing corporation? Davis argues that corporations are indeed a vanishing breed, almost halving in number from 1997 to 2012 and that today the corporation is a very different beast compared with the vertically integrated leviathan that provided stable employment and opportunities for millions of workers in the industrial age. Then operations were often rooted in local communities that provided a base for local scrutiny, enabling their excesses to be reined in by unionised labour and by the state. Legal changes that enabled individuals to own stock led to the increase in retirement schemes managed by mutual funds which shaped the corporation's drive to maximise profit. Davis describes Nike as an exemplar of injunctions by institutional investors to "stick to the knitting" by focusing on "core competencies" and outsourcing everything else. Employees in the USA have been particularly affected by these changes as corporations once provided them with the security of health and retirement benefits and of a steady career ladder to follow which have since been withdrawn.

The Transnational Context

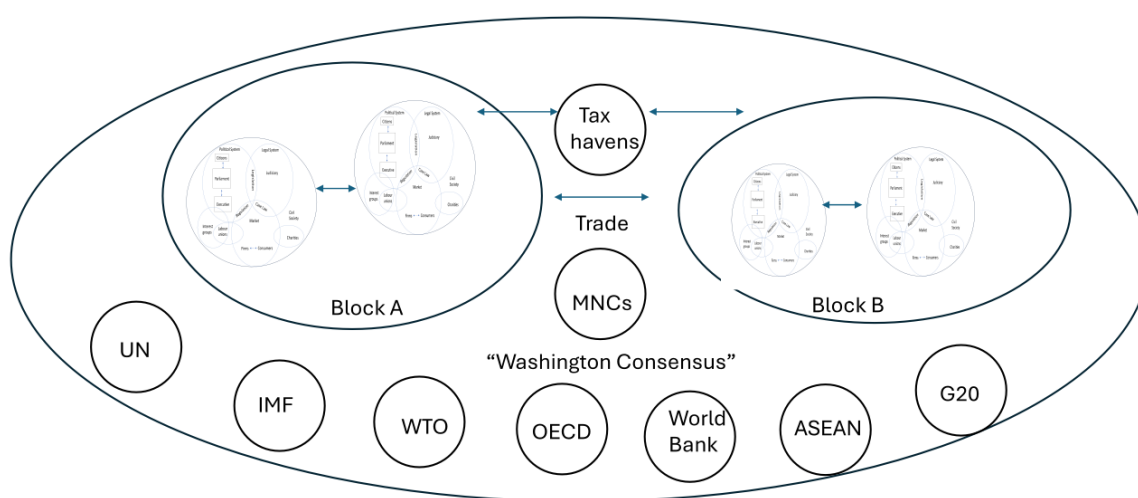
The transnational context adds a layer of complexity to the above involving physical and cultural distance. Additionally, one must often take account those agencies that were formed mainly after the Second World War when the United States was at the height of its influence. The International Labour Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 following the end of the First World War, while the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were founded in 1944 after the meeting at Bretton-Woods, New-Hampshire, followed by the formation of the United Nations in 1945. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which forms the rules for international trade was signed in 1948 and in 1995, the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established to ensure free movement of trade. There has also been a movement towards the formation of transnational trade blocs. The European Union formed in 1993 (originally the European Economic Community formed in 1957) had twenty-seven states at time of writing. Trading blocs formed since then include the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Southern Common Market (Mercosur).⁴⁰⁶

The "Washington Consensus" was formulated by the US economist John Williamson as a policy prescription to manage debt crises in Latin America, some of which were subsequently imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Williams argued that in 1989 there was close to "universal agreement" in Washington on

⁴⁰⁶ Source: World Economic Forum.

the reforms he suggested,⁴⁰⁷ that this involved an extension of principles that, “had long been orthodox in OECD ...countries - macroeconomic discipline, outward orientation, and the market economy”.⁴⁰⁸ In line with neoliberal thinking, this involved pledges from countries in receipt of aid to respect private property rights, reduce budget deficits, broaden the tax base, direct government expenditure into areas of high economic growth, allow the market decide interest rates, privatize state enterprises and be receptive to foreign direct investment.⁴⁰⁹

The International context of Trade



⁴⁰⁷ Williamson, John, (2005). The strange history of the Washington Consensus. *Journal of Post-Keynesian Economics*, Winter 2004-5, vol 27(2):195-206.

⁴⁰⁸ Williamson. John (2005: 197). He later argues here that this should have gone further, by pressing for institutional reform and not just policy reform. In this paper he also expresses his strong disapproval of being blamed for devising a policy that has ‘brought misery and ruin in its wake; for example, by causing the collapse in Argentina’ a claim he finds “extraordinary” because in his view, this collapse was brought about by commitment to an unrealistic exchange rate, which he had explicitly argued against (ibid.: 199). Williamson complains that it seems to him that most critics have not bothered to read his account. Here he contrasts his version of the Washington Consensus which called for a competitive exchange rate with the IMF policy for floating or fixed rates; secondly, that he argued for the limitation of capital flows to Foreign Direct Investment, which in his view was a “terrible” decision by the IMF, provoking the Asian crisis of 1997. On the plus side he praises the role of the IMF and World Bank in tackling institutional reforms that were not included in his original paper, involving matters of governance and corruption. Williamson also argues that to describe it as a “synonym for neoliberalism or market fundamentalism... is a thoroughly objectionable perversion of the original meaning” (ibid.: 201). Williamson counters by arguing that there was by comparison very little consensus in international financial circles around neoliberal policies such as supply-side economics, monetarism or minimal government” (ibid.: 202). In his view the prescription involved a “pretty reasonable view of the role of the Bretton-Woods institutions”.

⁴⁰⁹ While quoted in the above footnote that he finds it ‘thoroughly objectionable’ that his prescription is neoliberal, many would argue that many of these policies are indeed compatible with a neoliberal orientation.

While the fixed boundedness of the nation-state is contrasted with the mobile fluidity of capital which flows across borders to wherever comparative advantage beckons, the latter can be relatively fixed by international agreements between state actors. For instance, although manufacturing in the USA and UK had been in decline since the 1950s, the outsourcing of production overseas accelerated from the mid-1980s. The flight of multinational capital to low-cost producers in Mexico, Asia and Africa provoked a three-fold concern in the USA and in other post-industrial countries. Firstly, there was the problem caused by slow-burning but growing resentment amongst those who, unable to learn to code⁴¹⁰, found themselves either unemployed, or working as part of the new precarity in once prosperous cities now turned to rust-belts. This was exacerbated by fears that growing levels of immigration exerted downward pressure on wages for whatever jobs were left. Third, there was outrage at the often dire working conditions and pay of those working in industries that had been transplanted overseas to manufacture for brands such as Apple, Wal-Mart, and Levi-Strauss. Such concerns formed the background to the thorny case history of child labour in Bangladesh which is discussed more fully in chapter six.

While the seeds of protectionism were sown by the first Trump administration, this was extended by Biden spokesperson Jake Sullivan under cover of his call for a “new Washington consensus”. Sullivan mentioned four challenges presented by the legacy of neoliberalism. First he critiqued policymakers’ reliance on the assumption of market efficiency, pointing out that this had led to the export of American jobs and knowhow overseas, principally to China, which in the meantime had vigorously subsidised its domestic industry; second, he argued the need to combat growing geopolitical threats posed by global disintegration; third, he called for new thinking to tackle the accelerating climate crisis; finally he signalled the need to confront the challenge to democracy presented by growing social inequality.⁴¹¹

In the light of the above Sullivan called for a new “Washington consensus” to build a “fairer and more durable economic order” and to reverse the trend for entire supply chains of strategic goods to move overseas. The incoming Trump regime struck a radically different stance by ripping up the much vaunted “rules-based order” that the USA had itself constructed, not only by lecturing its allies on their lack of democracy but imposing swingeing tariffs on them as well as on the rest of the world. The move away from neoliberalism to state-managed capitalism gained traction through the administration’s acquisition of a ten percent stake in Intel and the suggestion that it might also acquire stakes in “strategic industries” such as Lockheed Martin.⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Allegedly Joe Biden told coal-miners who were to be made redundant, “learn to code”. Source, Kelley, A. (2019). Biden tells coal miners to “learn to code”. *The Hill*, 31st December.

⁴¹¹ Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Renewing American Economic Leadership at the Brookings Institution, (2023). *The White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/27/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-renewing-american-economic-leadership-at-the-brookings-institution/>

⁴¹² Tett, G. (2025). America’s new “patriotic” capitalism. *Financial Times*, 30th-31st August, 9.

New Forms of Citizenship

Reflecting on Denmark's potential loss of sovereignty following the Maastricht Treaty, Robert Dahl (1994) was sanguine, arguing that even ancient societies had to confront the dilemma of whether to have a good deal of control over a small unit, or rather to cede control to avail of the benefits of a larger one. This important trade-off is not mentioned by Benquet and Bourgeron (2022) in their otherwise excellent book on alternative finance. By focusing solely on anti-democratic elements associated with the European Union executive they failed to recognize the importance of national security in light of a renewed "Great Game" that had been unfolding before their eyes and the renewed possibility of conflict between competing blocs.

Pertinently, as seems obvious in light of recent developments, Dahl mentioned that for the nation-state such decisions are constrained, not only by external economic events but also by military concerns. Questions of national security were scarcely addressed in the debate leading up to the UK Brexit referendum, which focused almost entirely on economics, which is ironic given the extensive use of information warfare by hostile governments at the time;⁴¹³ in retrospect, it seems obvious that a new global "great game" was already underway even then. In the same piece Dahl mentioned that it had only recently been recognised that control over immigration was slipping away from control by the nation-state. He offered a twofold remedy for these twin concerns; firstly, that citizens should first be thoroughly informed and consulted before decisions are made to cede a portion of national sovereignty to transnational institutions; and secondly, for the extension of democratic principles to supranational organisations, leading to the emergence of a transnational polyarchy. He acknowledged that it would be 'fanciful' to imagine that a centralised European parliament would be as responsive as its national counterpart and worried that it could easily lead to de facto guardianship. From this he argued that need to greatly strengthen democratic institutions in the community as well as in the national context.

Benhabib describes three forms of citizenship that emerged as a consequence of the shrinking role of the state through the formation of transnational organizations, comprising, deterritorialized, cosmopolitical and civil republican citizenship.⁴¹⁴ . Deterritorialized citizenship describes new forms of identification with transnational organizations beyond the nation-state such as the European Union (I'm not Irish, I'm European!). Advocates for cosmopolitical citizenship such as Martha Nussbaum, argued for open borders on the moral ground that one should not privilege one's immediate community over those who live in distant lands ('I'm a citizen of the world!'). In contrast, civil republican sceptics such as Michael Sandel argued that political and economic globalization undermines citizenship, defined as membership of a bounded community, arguing that the right to define the identity and boundaries of the community is fundamental to democracy ('I'm Irish!'). One might look backwards on these as three possible future trajectories, of which today one has emerged as the clear winner.

⁴¹³ See for example, Peters, (2017).

⁴¹⁴ Benhabib, (1999, 414-416).

Citizen-Consumers and Corporate Citizens

Unlike Robert Dahl, most liberals and neoliberals effect an artificial distinction between the public realm of the citizen which foregrounds rights, duties and equality, and the private realm of business and consumption where it is presumed that the interests of society are best served through the pursuit of self-interest by firms and consumers. Adam Smith is often mentioned as the inspiration for this when arguing that given the impossibility of gaining an omniscient understanding of the whole, acts of benevolence within the market can have unforeseen and unintended consequences that will result in distortions, so it is best to allow the myriad of self-interested actions by firms and consumers to play out.

Revelations made from the 1960s onwards by Rachel Carson who demonstrated the environmental devastation caused by the industrial agricultural system, and by Ralph Nader, who described the cold calculative actions of business interests to weigh the value of human lives against the costs of product safety, prompted many to challenge the above argument, on the one hand, by promoting the idea of “responsible” business and on the other, through emerging forms of “responsible” consumption such as ethical consumerism, green consumption and voluntary simplicity. Rapid globalization during the neoliberal era lent more visibility for Western consumers to observe the plight of workers in “developing” countries such as those indentured into slave labour in the cocoa industry, of small farmers living on the margins at the mercy of the multinational coffee industry, and the working conditions of those, particularly of children, who are employed in garment manufacture⁴¹⁵.

As Gary Becker made clear, from the neoliberal perspective, there are clear limits to the responsibility of the individual, whose only goal should be to look after their own interests. If this means caring well for others such as your children when they are young, then fair enough, as you might then reasonably expect them to return the favour when you are old and in need of care (but maybe not!). Becker’s ‘responsibilized’ individual is thus the opposite of the supposedly “responsible” individual consumer or the firm that risks detracting from its economic self-interest by ameliorating the plight suffered by others. On 13th September 1970, Milton Friedman famously had a letter published in the *New York Times* in response to campaigns for corporate ethics and social responsibility organised in response to the publication of *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) and *Unsafe at Any Speed* (Nader, 1965).⁴¹⁶ In the letter he argued that the only duty of a business is to its shareholders, to make a profit, describing arguments for corporate responsibility as, ‘hypocritical window dressing’ and likening the “socially responsible” executive to a puppet of the overweening State when his proper role should be as an agent of capital.

⁴¹⁵ See Crane (2013) as an example of growing academic interest in “modern” slavery.

⁴¹⁶ There is a fascinating video clip featuring Friedman responding to a question from Michael Moore about the notorious case of the design of the Ford Pinto, where Ford executives used cost-benefit analysis to decide whether or not to insert a crucial device to prevent death in the event that the petrol tank exploded. This was available on a number of sites including this one at the University of Pennsylvania. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gU50mfehl> See Cullen et al., (1994) and Dowie, (1994) for discussion of this case.

Moreover, acting as “legislator, executor and jurist” in pursuit of some social goal, “He is to decide whom to tax by how much and for what purpose, and he is to spend the proceeds—all this guided only by general exhortations from on high to restrain inflation, improve the environment, fight poverty and so on and on.” Friedman’s likening the “responsible” manager to the detested apparatchik of the State was no accident!

Friedman did not discuss why so many real consumers fail to follow their economic self-interest. If one casts the consumer in the classic role of *homo economicus* then one has the difficulty to explain behaviour that does not maximise utility from a transaction. Leaving aside for the moment that few real consumers seem to act in the manner prescribed, if one’s actions are purely framed by market considerations, then one should attend solely to consideration of price and quality, and bracket as irrelevant, factors that are external to the transaction such as the working conditions of those who made the product, or the prices paid to farmers. Grassroots initiatives such as the worldwide cooperative movement that arose from within civil society can be taken as challenges to the view of the amoral subject described by neoclassical economics.

Campbell (2004) argues that when viewed from the narrow perspective of *homo economicus*, individuals who seek to behave ethically can be described as “bad” consumers who fail to live up to the ideal by paying an ‘ethical premium’ rather than choosing the best product at the lowest cost.⁴¹⁷ In this understanding the heart of *homo economicus* is an ethical desert that is value free, such that to make a principled choice requires the importation of values from an external source such as religion. Soper (2007) challenges this view by developing an explanation that principled behaviour can be explicable within the logic of economic self-interest and so immanent to consumption with no need to rely on the importation of values from outside. In her account ‘alternative hedonists’ are those whose pleasure and enjoyment has been blunted by the knowledge that their consumption has damaged other individuals, or the wider environment and are thus distressed by their consumption of these “problematic pleasures”. Consequently, there is no clear distinction between what these individuals value and their pursuit of what they take to be their self-interest. Soper argues that by means of such practices, consumption might be ‘acquiring a republican dimension and emerging as a site of citizenship’.⁴¹⁸ This links to arguments by civic republicans such as Michael Sandel (1996) and Philip Pettit (1997) for whom liberalism tips too much in favour of the promotion of individual rights and focuses insufficiently on their duties as citizens.

Fair-trade and “ethically” oriented companies such as Ben n’ Jerry’s have aligned themselves along with those who are concerned about corporate corruption and who sympathise with global justice movements. Johnson (2008) argues that with increasing public awareness of the harms caused by consumption, the ethical corporation “privatizes” ethical concern by providing “solace” for those who are worried about the social and ethical provenance of what they consume. In this understanding, similar to

⁴¹⁷ This comes from Soper’s (2007) argument – I did not have access to the paper by Campbell, (2004). This issue is discussed further in chapter six in relation to Wal-Mart and Levi-Strauss.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 205.

green marketing, the citizen-consumer can express social and environmental concerns that impact them as citizens whilst sustaining a commitment to a consumer ideology based on perpetual economic growth and sovereign consumer choice with few limitations. In his study of Whole Foods Market (WFM) Johnson accepts that while consumption may serve help create solidarity around questions of social justice and sustainability, this does not compensate for the lack of a strong state. He blames the neoliberal mode of social reproduction which idealizes markets and consumers as the primary guardians of the public good, thus occluding the importance of non-market measures and of democratically accountable states.

From CSR to Corporate Citizenship.

Advocates of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have argued against Friedman that large corporations have a wider set of responsibilities beyond their shareholders which need to take into account the interests and wellbeing of stakeholders and of society in general. It has been argued that CSR was first used in the United States because it was especially conducive to the prevailing ideals of negative freedom, personal responsibility and a small state, where private philanthropy had long filled a gap between need and provision that were elsewhere met by the public purse (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Businesses that grow into large corporations can be stamped with and exemplify the values of their original owners and CEOs.⁴¹⁹ This can create tensions when the business is sold on to a major corporation, as happened following Unilever's takeover of ice-cream brand Ben & Jerrys. The founders of Ben and Jerrys ensured that the company would retain their social values once it was sold on by explicitly including a social mission for social and economic justice into their overall mission.⁴²⁰ After an escalating series of disputes between Unilever and those charged with ensuring Ben & Jerry's social mission, Ben & Jerry's CEO David Steever was fired for criticising Donald Trump, then in autumn 2025 "Jerry" Greenfield announced that he was leaving the company he had founded because Unilever had broken his heart.⁴²¹ While Unilever might have thought was the end of the matter, time will tell.⁴²²

The reluctance of one corporation to tackle an important social issue was made clear by the reaction of the Coca-Cola Corporation to requests from Greenpeace that they replace coolant in their freezers that cause environmental damage by releasing greenhouse gases with "Greenfreeze", a more benign technology that Greenpeace had itself developed. Coca-Cola resisted and only joined the "Greenfreeze" initiative after a high-profile publicity campaign was conducted against it in the runup to the Sydney Olympics. The corporation subsequently joined with Unilever, McDonald's and others to install

⁴¹⁹ Hambrick & Wowak, (2021).

⁴²⁰ Ben & Jerry's, Our values, activism and mission. <https://www.benjerry.co.uk/values>

⁴²¹ Hoskins, P. (2025) BBC co-founder quits over social activism row, *BBC News*, 13th September.

⁴²² Da Silva, J. (2025). Ben & Jerry's boss "ousted over political activism". *BBC News*, 19th March.

“Greenfreeze” technology, not only because it caused less environmental damage but on the grounds that it was quite possibly cheaper.⁴²³

As a consequence of rapidly developing globalization of trade, mounting concerns were expressed about the responsibility of firms to ensure humane conditions of labour, particularly with respect child labour used to manufacture goods imported into the West. Alongside other concerns this raised a question that one time would have been considered far-fetched if not preposterous, as to whether corporations might be considered citizens? Crane, Matten and Moon (2008) mention that for years large corporations have employed the language of corporate citizenship in communications to their publics. They differentiate a limited form of corporate citizenship, effectively consisting of re-labelling corporate philanthropic activity, from a wider form that associates it with the interests of its stakeholders. They consider, then reject, the notion of citizenship as a horizontal relation where the corporation is essentially treated as equivalent to an individual person, offering the historical example of a trade guild that might not have voted or done jury service, but could have engaged in lobbying and community decision making. They dismiss this form of citizenship because the justification for the vertical relation of government to its citizens is not to organizations but to protect those made of flesh and blood from the arbitrary exercise of power, including its own power. Alternatively they consider that the corporation might be considered as a metaphorical citizen, firstly because like *de jure* citizens, corporations have rights, and secondly, corporations have to obey the law and are subject to similar sanctions.⁴²⁴ They suggest that corporations might be thought of as quasi-citizens, on the basis they are made up of humans, that humans with property interests have traditionally been accorded citizenship rights, and that corporations form part of human society. In support of their argument that corporations have a civic identity they cite Robert Dahl’s contention that businesses are social enterprises, ‘that can be justified only if they serve public or social purposes’.⁴²⁵

Corporations as Governments

Companies have long been involved in governing towns, regions and even entire countries; the most infamous example the being East India Company formed by the British Crown in 1600 and the Hudson Bay company established in the seventeenth century that also acted as an agent of British colonial expansion.⁴²⁶ At one time there were thousands of company towns in the USA⁴²⁷ run by the likes of Hershey, Pullman and Singer, and while the influence many has since waned, the dominating presence of US Steel continued exert a subtle pull on decision-makers in Gary, Indiana, where legislation

⁴²³ Hartman, C.L. & E.R. Stafford, (2006). Chilling With Greenpeace, From the Inside Out, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer.

⁴²⁴ Crane, Matten & Moon, (2008, 26).

⁴²⁵ Reference is on page 30 to Dahl, (1972).

⁴²⁶ Gismond, M. (2020). The untold story of the Hudson’s Bay Company, *Canadian Geographic*, 2nd May.

⁴²⁷ Hirsch, M.L. (2015). America’s company towns; then and now. *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4th September.

to restrict pollution was enacted thirteen years after it was passed in a similar-sized town in the area.⁴²⁸

Crane et al. (2008) provide three ways by which corporations can assume a governance role when government steps back from doing so; firstly in the case of the privatization of state enterprises and the contracting out of citizen entitlements; secondly, they can step in to act as surrogate governments in situations where the state has not taken up the role of governing; and finally, they may do so in transnational contexts that are beyond the reach of the nation-state. The authors describe how in the role of surrogate government, Shell Nigeria failed to protect the rights of the Ogoni people,⁴²⁹ On the other hand Levi Strauss, Nike and others successfully acted to provide entitlements such as ensuring that employees of their overseas supplier were paid a living wage and by financing schooling for child labourers.⁴³⁰ The subject of child labour in Bangladesh is discussed further in chapter six.

Discussion

The argument by Crane et al (2008) for the New Corporate Citizen (NCC) has been criticised for suggesting that this should be recognised as a *fait accompli* which only requires the imprimatur of academia (Van Oosterhout, 2005). Others contend that the very idea of corporate citizenship demonstrates that capital is now entirely dominant, occupying, ‘the central institutional role in providing basic citizenship rights to individuals in the 21st century’ (Jones & Haigh, 2007, 67). While some might argue that this goes too far, because Crane et al. (2008) define clear limits to citizenship, their further argument that business may well entertain ‘non-benign motivations’ is beyond doubt. Finally, Crane et al, (2008) reflect on the extent to which corporations have changed the very idea of citizenship. They conclude that this has a minimal effect in the situation where the corporation provides services, as the government remains as the ultimate guarantor. However, on the other hand entitlements to a public service such as telecommunications are now framed as consumer choices rather than as citizen rights.⁴³¹

In 2021, two books arrived in close succession, by Vivek Ramaswamy, and by Carl Rhodes, each of which criticised acts of corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship and corporate governance, which they bundled together under the label of “woke capitalism”. In a reflection of what Callison and Slobodian (2021) call ‘diagonalism’ and others might call “horseshoe politics”, one might once never have expected to mention these authors in the same breath as one is a darling of the US New Right and a challenger to Donald Trump for the Republican nomination in the 2024 election, who

⁴²⁸ Crenson, (1971).

⁴²⁹ Crane, Matten & Moon, (2008, 87).

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 79.

called the “climate change agenda” a “hoax”⁴³², whilst the other is a left-leaning academic. Rhodes and Ramaswamy come close to Milton Friedman’s (1970) position by arguing that to engage in political concerns is dangerous because it detracts from the core purpose of the business. They also separately argue that acts of ‘corporate social responsibility’ are generally inauthentic and so sully and defile the very values they purport to promote. For instance, Ramaswamy targeted the use of the Diversity Equity and Inclusion index’ (DEI) used by firms such as Blackrock when making investment decisions, as a form of over-reach that is an abuse of market power. (Of course, the moment that Donald Trump assumed power Blackrock demonstrated its gritty commitment to this policy by promptly doing what *Private Eye* calls a “reverse ferret”.⁴³³). In response to the demand that companies should play a role in *Black Lives Matter*, Ramaswamy argued that corporations should not be using their resources as a substitute for the free speech and debate that should be taking place in the market square. Indeed for Ramaswamy, a bigger threat to democracy is posed by corporations whose executives behave authentically, who really do believe in the social cause advocated by the business, as in his view this deployment of corporate power effectively sidesteps political debate that ought to occur in the public square.

Given the above, it was not propitious for the Walt Disney Company that Ron deSantis, governor of Florida had purportedly come across Ramaswamy’s book. Disney has a massive presence in Florida as the largest employer, employing thousands in four theme parks and two water parks and bringing huge revenue to state coffers. Given its wealth and power the corporation usually got its own way in the sunshine state until in 2022 it ran afoul of the local administration. The “Parental Rights in Education Act” passed by the Florida state legislature had no direct relation to Disney’s business as it provided the right for parents to decide whether or not their child aged between five and eleven years old should receive school lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity. Otherwise known as the “Don’t Say Gay” Act, this was opposed as being anti LGBTQ, by treating individuals identifying as such as second-class citizens who are not entitled to the same rights and privileges as other Americans. Activists initiated a campaign against the Act and enlisted prominent local businesses.

Disney initially remained aloof on the issue but following pressure from activists and the media eventually spoke out against the Act and paused political donations in Florida. Since 1967 Disney had been granted special governing rights over its land with the power to assume a governmental role in its parks. The state government of Florida responded to Disney’s opposition to the Act by passing legislation that removed Disney from this governmental role. The tussle ended up in the courts in 2023 with Disney arguing that its right to freedom of speech had been violated by the Florida government and with the

⁴³² Ross, K. (2023) *Climate change and white supremacy are not problems for US*, Ramaswamy argues. ABC News, 20th September. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/climate-change-white-supremacy-problems-us-ramaswamy-argues/story?id=103307611>

⁴³³ Pitcher, J. (2025) BlackRock drops DEI references in annual report. *The Wall Street Journal*, 26th February.

government launching a separate countersuit.⁴³⁴ While the issue over the Act was temporarily resolved in 2024, De Santis' launch of a "war on woke" failed to gain sufficient financial or public support and he withdrew from the Presidential race on the 21st January 2024.

⁴³⁴ Neal, G. (2023). *Legal troubles in the magic kingdom*. Harvard Law Today, Faculty Scholarship. <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/rebecca-tushnet-analyzes-disneys-lawsuit-against-ron-desantis/>

Beyond Neoliberalism

From the above, the neoliberal project has involved not just the privatisation of public industries and the reduction of the power of the trades unions but consisted more widely of the penetration of market logic into all aspects of life. Constraints on capital were swept aside through the deregulation of markets and the movement of capital and production overseas from the West to Asia⁴³⁵. Employment in Asia rose rapidly, particularly in China, whilst unemployment soared in traditional industrial heartlands of the West. The financial sector boomed as consumer debt rose sharply, particularly in the mortgage market, as many availed of cheap money to become rentiers.⁴³⁶ The crash of 2008, when it came, was the result of a number of factors. The precipitating scandal of loans to the 'sub-prime' sector revealed the hubris of bankers who either didn't fully understand the complexity of their products, or who knew fine well, but kept quiet because they couldn't get off the rollercoaster, regulators asleep at the wheel with an unfounded belief in market rationality, fraudulent activity in the financial and property markets and a massive pyramid of consumer debt.

Compared to the administration of Trump-45, which focused on reducing immigration, cutting welfare and implementing tax-cuts, Trump-47 not only doubled down on these but relied almost exclusively on Presidential Executive Orders to, amongst many other things, illegally impose trade tariffs, forcibly deport immigrants and dismiss thousands of Federal employees. By doing so it took an axe to the central institutions of the state, bypassing and overriding the legislative branch, cowing civil servants through the manic actions of the non-elected Elon Musk and DOGE, threatening state lawyers and judges and attacking the universities, by demanding a say in hiring policies, removing research funding and halting visa applications for overseas students.

From a neoliberal perspective, barring tax cuts, almost none of the above seems to make sense, and indeed the entire package might collectively be read as a wholesale rejection of neoliberalism and its most cherished ideals of open markets and international trade based on reducing what David Harvey calls the 'friction of distance', by enabling the free movement of capital, goods, services and labour. Trump-47 has in this light been seen as having surfed in on a populist wave of a revolt against neoliberalism and particularly, immigration. Triantidis and Cowan (2020) counter the actions of radical right apologists and governments which are implementing aggressive protectionist policies and immigration controls to argue from Hayek, that such interventions are authoritarian and coercive and act to undermine competitive markets.

Commentators were puzzled by the muted responses of corporates, markets and bondholders to Trump's rampaging excesses. After all, Zohran Mamdani, who won the

⁴³⁵ I am all too familiar with my geocentric view of what constitutes 'West' and 'East', but decided to stick with this because the alternatives were simply too cumbersome.

⁴³⁶ In the USA between 1999 and 2008 amounts owed on instalment mortgages related lines of credit tripled from \$3.3 trillion to \$10 trillion. See, Brown, M.; A. Haughwout, D. Lee, & W. van der Klaauw, (2013). The Financial Crisis at the Kitchen Table: Trends in Household Debt and Credit. Current Issues in Economics and Finance, *Federal Reserve Bank of New York*, vol. 19(2), p.3

Democratic mayoral primary had been roundly attacked by them for his promise to freeze rents, provide free public transport and groceries run by the state. Trump on the other hand had threatened the integrity of the Federal Reserve Bank by firing one of its governors. One economist described the failure by bondholders who go to Jackson Hole to rein in Trump as, ‘a Defconn1 event’, explaining their supine quiescence as based on fear; apparently the regime had drawn up a “loyalty-list” of 553 corporates⁴³⁷. Another commentator resorted to extraordinarily convoluted language to describe Trump’s actions as signalling, “a new paradigm: so-called fiscal dominance, where central bank policy bends to politics”.⁴³⁸ I had to read that twice.

Perry Anderson casts his net widely linking right-wing campaigns against immigration and left-wing campaigns against inequality as slow-burning responses to the cataclysmic Great Financial Crash (GFC) of 2008, the ensuing credit-crunch, and the imposition of austerity.⁴³⁹ In his view populist insurgencies and the election of illiberal governments since the financial crash are symptoms of a popular revolt against the three principal consequences of neoliberal governance comprising, oligarchy, rising inequality, and increasing factor mobility. Taking oligarchy first, two studies revealed a huge loss of confidence in the political system in America and in Europe, with just 28% of voters in the former believing that democracy working,⁴⁴⁰ lower even than after the Capitol riots in 2021, coupled to the belief that the state has been captured by vested interests.⁴⁴¹ Crane et al, (2008) observed this trend some years ago and argued that social disquiet is not so much about the fact that corporations exert power on government to serve their interests and to shape citizenship, but rather on the lack of transparency and corporate accountability.⁴⁴² Populist revolts that followed the GFC were directed against national and supranational elites such as the EU⁴⁴³, with political allegiances oscillating from left to right as the centre, as Yeats once wrote, failed to hold. The populist revolt that followed the crash was directed against national and supranational elites such as the EU, reducing the centre ground while boosting extreme parties to left and right.⁴⁴⁴ Anderson argues that the right has so far won because the traditional working class is no more and the left has not developed a convincing alternative narrative to neoliberalism.

⁴³⁷ Tett, G. (2025). The psychology of CEO loyalty to Trump. *Financial Times*, 6th-7th Sept., 11.

⁴³⁸ Fontanella-Khan, J.; G. Steer, C. Jones & A. Reiter, (2025). A calculated silence. The Big Read, *Financial Times*, 30th-31st August, 7.

⁴³⁹ Anderson, (2025), Regime change in the West, *London Review of Books*, 3rd April, 6.

⁴⁴⁰ Jones, J.M. (2024). Record Low in U.S. Satisfied With Way Democracy Is Working. *Gallup*, 5th January.

⁴⁴¹ Fetterolf, J. & S.H. Ramones, (2024). 72% of Americans say the U.S. *used* to be a good example of democracy, but isn’t anymore. *Pew Research Center*, 10th July. A UK survey of those 16-29 found 27% said they would prefer a dictatorship over democracy whilst 63% thought democracy is in trouble (Keate, N., (2025). Majority of UK’s young adults ‘concerned’ about democracy, new poll says, *Politico*, 31st March.

⁴⁴² Crane et al. (2008, 84).

⁴⁴³ Especially following the imposition of financial ‘haircuts’ to Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain, collectively disparaged as PIGS, imposed by the European Bank.

⁴⁴⁴ such as UKIP in Britain, the Freedom Party, in Austria and National Rally, in France and on the left, with Podemos, in Spain, Syriza and the Five Star movement in Italy and of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

Anderson does not discuss how distrust in democratic institutions and central government fed into the narrative that the state is controlled by a shadowy elite, manifested in the belief in a 'deep state' that controls what is really going on. Prior to the 2016 US election, following the leak of Hilary Clinton's emails by foreign agents, the QAnon conspiracy theory that spread rapidly from media sites Fourchan and Eightchan alleged that the Clintons headed a gang of vampire paedophile rapists who murdered children in a New York pizza restaurant.⁴⁴⁵ Fears were further stoked during the Covid pandemic the US Department of Health was accused of embedding computer chips in vaccines.

Reflecting on seemingly outlandish conspiracy theories such as QAnon, Gatehouse (2025), has found real-life parallels. Whether or not they openly express such fears, individuals today feel powerless and overwhelmed in the face of the impending climate crisis, of their smallness relative to the massive size of corporations, of the precarity of employment amid well-publicised warnings of being overwhelmed by hordes of migrants, of being defrauded by social media scams, and of the rapidly rising threat posed by the Artificial Intelligence, heralded as the biggest change to society since the fifteenth century. There are real analogues of imaginary fears, in the form of predatory paedophiles and sex-abusers such as Jimmy Saville and Jeffrey Epstein who colloqued with the elite while abusing children and young women with impunity in plain sight, the secret world revealed by Wikileaks and the Panama Papers, and evidence of politicians who use access to privileged information that can directly influence business interests and power to regulate (or not) the scope of business activities and control over taxes, subsidies, fines and mandates as leverage, whose salaries which are around 3.4 times that of the average worker, is belied by their actual wealth.⁴⁴⁶

Culture Wars

For Francis Fukuyama, neoliberalism is one of two developments that have seriously undermined liberal values of respect for the equal dignity of individuals through the rule of law that protects their rights and through constitutional checks on the state's ability to interfere with those rights. He blames western governments for sitting on the sidelines while capital and jobs flowed to enrich workers in Asia, thus highlighting a failure of governments which should have protected their citizens who lost jobs, opportunities and hope, or at least have acted to ameliorate their situation. Fukuyama also blames the rise of "woke" liberalism in the form of the prioritisation of identity politics by the left from the 1990s, which privileged the rights of minorities and immigrants over the fate of the industrial working class.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Details of this and related conspiracies are discussed in the BBC Radio 4 series, *The Coming Storm*, narrated by Gabriel Gatehouse, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001324r>

⁴⁴⁶ See for example Schewizer, P. (2011). *Throw them all out: How politicians and their friends got rich off stock tips, land deals and cronyism that would send the rest of us to prison*. Boston, New York: Houghton-Mifflin.

⁴⁴⁷ Fukuyama, F. (2024). Trump unleashed: what now for American. *Financial Times*, Life and Arts, Saturday 9th November: 1-2.

Fukuyama has a point in that the ‘culture wars’ which have been raging on and off university campuses for the past ten and more years have fed into the current state of affairs. On the one hand commentators have noted a change in the behaviour of minorities and those who represent them who had at one time campaigned vigorously for equality, so as to be included as full members of society and recognised as the possessing the same rights as everyone else. This has been supplanted by calls for recognition, not on the basis of one’s equal standing with others, but of one’s difference, being different for example from those now disparaged as ‘gender-typical’ or ‘neuro-typical’. Relatedly, some adherents of Critical Race Theory began to preach a variant of feminist standpoint epistemology, that only those from oppressed minorities who experience a particular form of suffering, for instance, the individual who identifies as Irish, working-class and Trans, has a right to speak, or write about their experience.

In the institutional context advocacy groups signed up thousands of public institutions and businesses to gender diversity programmes. In the UK these groups pressed for the enactment of legislation to enable individuals to nominate their gender and to re-define the meaning of key terms such as “woman” and “mother” by widening their scope.⁴⁴⁸ Proclaiming itself as the largest in Europe, the UK based lobby group Stonewall enjoyed social marketing success by promoting and selling its perspective on sex and identity to more than eight hundred organisations in government, political parties, business and most universities which it also polices.⁴⁴⁹ The Global Workplace Equality Index (GWEI) devised by Stonewall allocates scores to institutions based on their progress towards implementing their version of gender known as the ‘Gender Bred Person’. Concerns have since been raised as to how Stonewall gained this pre-eminent position, given it is just one from a number of groups that lobby government on questions of sex and gender. Following a BBC led⁴⁵⁰ investigation many institutions have since left one or both of its initiatives.⁴⁵¹ Stonewall has also been mentioned as having a ‘chilling’ effect on free speech by playing a ‘direct role’ in a report on the ‘cancelling’ of a visiting academic from Essex University⁴⁵² and later in the removal from Sussex University of the ‘gender-critical’ theorist Professor Kathleen Stock who had criticised its definition of transphobia as being too wide.⁴⁵³

The situation of the UK universities is illustrative of what Callison and Slobodian call diagonalism, so named because traditional dividing lines based on politics and gender

⁴⁴⁸ This led to controversy in the Scottish government including a purge of “gender critical” feminists from the Green Party. In 2024 the UK Supreme Court clarified that the meaning of “woman” in the UK is

⁴⁴⁹ Sex Matters, *Keeping track of Stonewall*. <https://sex-matters.org/about-us/what-we-are-up-against/keeping-track-of-stonewall/>

⁴⁵⁰ Nolan (2021). Stonewall. Nolan Investigates, BBC, NI. (ten episodes). <https://www.bbc.com/audio/brand/p09yjmp>

⁴⁵¹ See Sex Matters website (op. cit.).

⁴⁵² Foster, A., (2021). Review of two events involving external speakers. *University of Essex*, 17th May. <https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers>

⁴⁵³ Moorhead, J. (2021) Kathleen Stock: taboo around gender has a chilling effect on academics. *The Guardian*, 22nd May.

have given way to more complex relations. For instance, longtime campaigner for gay rights Peter Tatchell was criticised by Trans activists for signing a letter on defence of free speech which cited attempts to ban feminists Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel and gender-critical feminists who had raised concerns about predatory men gaining access to womens' spaces.⁴⁵⁴ The term "woke", which once narrowly referred to black consciousness has since been appropriated by those on the right and given a pejorative gloss as a signifier that articulates concern for racial equality, diversity, sexual and gender rights and paradoxically, global heating, such that engagement with any of these issues is re-signified been as 'woke politics', to signify effete, 'radical chic', elitism promulgated by the 'rainbow left', comprising college-educated scroungers who couldn't care less about blue-collar concerns.⁴⁵⁵ It has not difficult for hard-right activists to mobilize the resentment of those 'left behind' in this direction, who feel slighted against what they perceive to be elite concern with identity politics, to themselves identify as 'anti-woke', howsoever so defined.⁴⁵⁶

Horse-Shoe Politics?

From the above the New Right movement might be regarded as the mirror-image of its equally hard-edged counterpart organised on college campuses by those who refuse to tolerate ideas, opinions or people they deem intolerable, cancelling events and de-platforming and scapegoating individuals whose views they consider repugnant. As mentioned above the 'culture wars' that have bubbled up in the last decade or so are not so much between left and right but diagonalist in the sense that old identifications no longer matter.⁴⁵⁷ Given that they are deemed middle-class by origin, or education, right-wing activists share in common with their leftist predecessors the tendency to claim that they are the true, authentic voice of those they represent. In the 1990s, British leftist anti-road-protestors despised those they labelled "fluffies" just as neo-Nazi's in Italy, Germany

⁴⁵⁴ Siddiqui, H. (2021). Stonewall is at the centre of toxic debate on trans rights and gender identity. *The Guardian*, 5th June. Tatchell, 2019 he argued that Stonewall had lost the original vision espoused by the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). See Tatchell, P. (2019). Stonewall sparked a global LGBT+ freedom movement. Today's activists have lost the Stonewall vision, 19th June. Peter Tatchell Foundation. <https://www.petertatchellfoundation.org/stonewall-sparked-a-global-lgbt-freedom-movement/>

⁴⁵⁵ See Van Dreew et al., (2025). This study of "ordinary American" understandings of "woke" showed a clear divide between Republicans and Democrats with those in the middle being more varied in describing its meaning. The authors describe the coaptation of the term by Republicans such as Ron DeSantis, "Florida is where woke goes to die".

⁴⁵⁶ Despite that gender politics was reputedly a low priority for most voters, the Trump2024 campaign recognised the salience of abortion and gender politics to conservative Christians some of whom formed part of his "base", whilst others who had been lifelong democrats, were ripe for turning on this issue. Trump made his position clear well-ahead of the election, then spending over \$21 million on 'anti-woke' advertisements in the runup, attacking Kamala Harris for, among other things, supporting "taxpayer funded sex changes for prisoners". The sub-text was clear; sex-changes for prisoners were a priority for the democrats at a time of rising anxiety over the effects of inflation, when many were reportedly skipping meals to fund mortgage payments. (References, Migdon, B. & J. Manchester, (2023). Republicans seize on transgender rights ahead of 2024. *The Hill*, 22nd March; Alfonseca, K. & S.R. Kim, (2021). Trump allies are pouring millions into anti-trans election ads as election nears, ABC News, 21st October.

⁴⁵⁷ Callison, W. & Q. Slobodian, (2021.) Coronapolitics: from the Reichstag to the Capitol. *The Boston Review*, 12th January.

and Poland today proclaim their difference from the “rainbow left”. In *Living Right*, Agnieszka Pasieka (2024) describes as vicarious resentment the outrage that these middle-class activists, “experience in the name of others”⁴⁵⁸

What is striking is the extent to which New Right activists in Europe have with some exceptions, embraced US neo-libertarian rhetoric which echoes Russian propaganda⁴⁵⁹, raising the spectre of national socialism by sharing the old left’s antipathy to capitalism, particularly against big corporations, and by engaging in social welfare programmes among the (white) “deserving poor”, fomenting violence by organising anti-immigration demonstrations and casting themselves as the sole proponents of anti-capitalist and anti-liberal radicalism, since in their view the left “made peace” with the free market⁴⁶⁰. Against calls for diversity they assert “traditional masculine” values that critics portray as “toxic masculinity”, espousing ethno-nationalist rhetoric; circulating potent myths such as the “great replacement theory” and advocating apartheid based on supposed racial difference; and avowing a perverted view of Christianity that reduces it to a caricature of ritual stripped of its religiosity.⁴⁶¹

What does all of this have to do with capitalism? Quite a lot, it seems. Anderson (2025) argues that while the left focused on inequality, the right leveraged factor mobility by focusing on immigration. For him the Brexit vote was a landmark populist revolt against the bipartisan neoliberal establishment whipped up by right-wing politicians and the tabloid press. While some pointed to role played by egregious lies, the use of misleading slogans and the involvement of malign actors in the Leave campaign, for many, the Brexit vote was an expression of resentment felt by voters who felt that they had been cast adrift and left to founder, particularly those living in regions such as the “Red Wall”, in the wake of the flight of capital overseas. The slogan ‘Take Back Control’ deployed by the Leave campaign had significant cut-through with voters, particularly in the context of a so-called migration crisis, highlighting the lack of ability for the nation-state to maintain control of its borders.⁴⁶²

Neo-Libertarianism

In relation to the Brexit vote others have pointed to murkier forces at work behind the scenes such as the malign actors involved in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Some

⁴⁵⁸ Agnieszka, (2024, 60, 116).

⁴⁵⁹ Anne Applebaum describes the fixation of Russian media on the USA and how it has sought to capitalize on Western discontent by promoting itself as the last bastion and protector of white, Christian values; “Putin has a following on the authoritarian far right having convinced some native conservatives that Russia is a “white Christian state”. In reality Russia has very low church attendance, legal abortion and a multiethnic population containing millions of Muslim citizens. The autonomous region of Chechnya which is part of the Russian Federation is governed in part by elements of sharia law and has killed gay men in the interests of Islamic purity.” (Applebaum, 2024, 76).

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁶¹ “We like Catholicism without the Christian content”:, Ibid., 139.

⁴⁶² Schmidt, S.K. (2020). *An institutional mismatch: why ‘taking back control’ proved so appealing*, LSE Blogs, 7th May.

asked why, if Britain was going to become great again did Somerset Capital, part owned by prominent Brexit spokesperson Jacob Rees-Mogg choose that specific time to relocate its base from the UK to Ireland? Alongside meddling by foreign states, most analyses of the Brexit vote to leave the EU explained the result as a protest against government expressing the bottled-up resentment of large sections of the population following years of austerity imposed in the wake of the financial crash and at the impunity of bankers, coupled with the widespread feeling that government had ceded control over important aspects of policy, especially on immigration and the administration of justice, to unelected technocrats from the European Union.

The elegant analysis conducted by Benquet and Bourgeron, (2022) complexifies this story by focusing on the 'supply side', upending the assumption that capital, in particular finance capital, supported the pro-Remain camp. They demonstrate that although traditional institutions such as banks and insurance companies backed the campaign to Remain, second-wave finance, made up largely of hedge funds, private equity and real estate funds, heavily backed the Leave campaign.⁴⁶³ Their rationale for doing so was straightforward; the less the regulatory burden, the more scope for profit. Benquet and Bourgeron sum up the overall orientation of second-wave finance as, 'Euro scepticism, Atlanticism, authoritarianism and denial of climate change',⁴⁶⁴ which generally accords with right-wing sentiment, although why single out climate change? The authors illustrate the linkage of second-wave finance to the 'Tufton Street' network, so-called because this is the London base for influential think-tanks such as the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), the Adam Smith Institute (ASI), Economists for Free Trade and the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF). These are linked to the Atlas Foundation, a collective of over four hundred libertarian think-tanks linked to the 'alt-right' in the USA.⁴⁶⁵

Benquet and Bourgeron mention that one of the central members of this network is the Cato Institute funded by the Koch brothers who made their billions from fossil fuels and are committed deniers of global warming. Overall, those they describe as authoritarian libertarians take isolationist, but not protectionist, views, and reject state regulation and any form of interstate relationship. Contra Adam Smith and Hayek, for both had a vision of the common good, authoritarian libertarianism, defends 'an ethical approach to liberty without any regard for its effects on the common good.' Although it is libertarian in economic terms it is socially authoritarian as it favours the repression of social movements and the suppression of civil rights, by controlling freedom of speech and the movement of individuals.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶³ Benquet & Bourgeron, (2022). See for example, Table 3, p. 33 and Table 11, p. 41.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 104.

Reading Benquet and Bourgeron can help make sense of a document entitled the ‘NatCon manifesto’ that I came across by chance.⁴⁶⁷ When I first read it the manifesto seemed to proclaim the end of the conservative right’s commitment to neoliberalism. The ten principles are,⁴⁶⁸

1. To maintain national sovereignty and independence.
2. To reject globalism and transnational institutions.
3. focus on the integrity of, ‘a strong’ nation state, but shorn of the function of civil administration “a policy making judiciary”.
4. ‘The Bible should be read as the first among sources of a shared Western civilization’.
5. A commitment to law and order.
6. The free market cannot be absolute because hostile powers have manipulated markets to ‘despoil America and other countries and because multinational companies damage public life by censoring political speech, flooding the country with dangerous and addictive substances and pornography, and promoting obsessive, destructive personal habits’.
7. Focus research expenditure on military applications.
8. Work to preserve ‘family values’ and against ‘unconstrained individualism’.
9. Recognize that, ‘unassimilated immigration has become a source of weakness and instability.
10. Against racism in all its forms.

While many if not most of the above might be rather puzzling to those of a neoliberal sensibility (for instance, why the focus on religion and against ‘unconstrained individualism’?), points two and nine are directly antithetical to neoliberal principles, point six is particularly so, as well as being distinctly odd in its quaint expression (“despoiled”), use of hyperbole (“floods of addictive substances and pornography”) and opaque untethered accusations (multinationals censoring speech). Something of this logic has since been clarified as it virtually mirrors the language used by Donald Trump when he announced a swingeing set of tariffs on so-called “Liberation Day”, the second of April, 2025.

Hayek was faced with the conundrum to explain the evolution of the modern form of ‘power with’ exercised in the marketplace constituted unintentionally by transactions between strangers who are indifferent to each other, from the solidary communal form of ‘power-with’ engaged in by kinship groups in the African savanna over the long course of the Pleistocene. He envisaged a continual tension between the ancient impulse that

⁴⁶⁷ Geoghegan, P. (2023). At NatCon London, Short Cuts, *London Review of Books*, 45(11), 1st June.

⁴⁶⁸ National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles. <https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>

draws us inwards towards community and the countervailing drive towards individuality in a market society. Slobodian notes the difficulty of trying to imagine how the former might give rise to the latter,

Hayek seemed to demand something elusive: a small group without the group feeling that might move in the direction of sharing, a society absent of demands for social justice, a troop with no impulse toward redistribution; a small group with communal cohesion without a sense of community.⁴⁶⁹

Hayek did not base his explanation on genes but rather on cultural evolution, suggesting that the old solidary order broke down as societies grew larger and more differentiated. As communality broke down, so cultural group selection over aeons led to the emergence of a new morality that laid down rules for how to dwell amicably amongst strangers, involving virtues honesty, respect for property, privacy, contract, exchange, trade, competition and gain. Moreover, although both moralities continue to exist alongside one another today, given that the more ancient draw towards egalitarianism is more potent, it must be restrained, as egalitarianism works against the prosperity yielded by market competition. It is noteworthy that groups matter in Hayek's explanation only to the extent that they serve as the media for cultural transmission by religion and other institutions of these new 'symbolic truths'.⁴⁷⁰

Given that Hayek's explanation is an early example of theorisation from the perspective of cultural group, or multilevel, selection, it is worth noting that proponents today have reached the markedly different conclusion that the most successful groups are those that suppress within-group competition and are not dominated by elites.⁴⁷¹ But why let facts get in the way of one's preferred argument! Slobodian describes how Hayek's followers, whether anarcho-capitalists or paleolibertarians, moved boldly onward to formulate explanations that are much more hard-edged than Hayek's, based on largely outmoded arguments linked to racial and gender differences that many academics assumed had long ago been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Slobodian's (2025) main contribution is to describe how anarcho-capitalists such as Rothbard, Hans-Hermann Hoppe and other members of the US alt-right⁴⁷² effectively moulded Hayek and particularly, Mises,⁴⁷³ to a homegrown image of white supremacy wedded to methodological instrumentalism that seems beloved to so many in that benighted country, summed up in the three, 'Hs'; hard-culture, hard borders, and hard

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁷¹ "Multilevel cultural evolution continues to operate in the present. The most successful large-scale societies are those that manage to coordinate activity and suppress disruptive forms of within-society competition. Large-scale societies that are dominated by small groups of elites tend to fail at the societal level (Wilson et al., 2015, 139).

⁴⁷² The term coined by Gottfried and Spencer in 2008 that packages everything on the right from anarcho-capitalists to conspiracy theorists.

⁴⁷³ Slobodian argues that Mises work was more conducive to their way of thinking because, 'he explicitly associated differences in certain traits with racial groups', for instance in relation to intelligence and willpower (ibid., 48).

currency. In search of academic credibility, they embraced the findings of psychologists Richard Lynn and Hans Eysenck, who contended that they had demonstrated the existence of immutable differences between groups based on race and gender. Anarcho-capitalists were particularly taken by the claim by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) that inherited IQ and not environmental factors determines employment, income, welfare dependency, divorce and parental behaviour. In their book the authors gave particular credence to the research findings of Richard Lynn, based on his collection of national data sets of IQ. Leon Kamin was scathing in his review of Lynn's research, arguing that, "Lynn's distortions and misrepresentations of the data constitute a truly venomous racism, combined with scandalous disregard for scientific objectivity" (Kamin, 1995, 100). Kamin also argued that *The Bell Curve* was based on similar shoddy research that involved treating correlation as causation as, 'another eruption of crude biological determinism' whose argument was 'at many critical points pathetic'.⁴⁷⁴

Despite mounting criticism that their argument for 'hard culture' rests on sand, apologists for this view continue to dress overt racism in the clothes of scientific objectivity, essentialising supposed cultural difference, by arguing for a racial hierarchy that ensures whites come out on top one way (based on differences in climate)⁴⁷⁵ or another (on the basis of differences in IQ). On the basis of at best shaky evidence, they continue to argue that egalitarianism is morally reprehensible and affirmative action and overseas aid programmes are wasteful because of "hard" cultural differences in abilities and attitudes, and so condemn the 'forced integration' of schools.⁴⁷⁶

While some might think that hard borders are antithetical to neoliberalism, which aspires to free movement of people as well as free markets, Mises and Hayek offered some grounds for controlling immigration,⁴⁷⁷ whilst English radical Peter Brimelow attempted to justify the free movement of goods but not of people by arguing that, if free trade works

⁴⁷⁴ Although Colman broadly accepts the existence of a "Black-White Gap" in IQ, a proportion of which is inherited, he argues that this could be entirely due to environmental factors (Colman, 2016). Others like Kamin, have called Lynn's methods and reporting into question. One review found that Lynn had misreported and omitted some of his own data and that when this was taken into account his rankings of nations was no longer stable (Thomas, 2011). Additionally, instead of representative samples Lynn's dataset comprised a hotchpotch of many convenience samples, for example IQ for Eritrea was estimated entirely on scores from children living in orphanages (Sear, 2022). Following an outcry, Elsevier initiated a review of Lynn's research (see report by Devlin, H. & D. Pegg, (2024). Publisher reviews national IQ research by British 'race scientist' Richard Lynn. *The Guardian*, 10th December. Hans Eysenck, another prominent researcher of IQ has also had his methods questioned *The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* and *Sage* mentioned in relation to one of his papers, "Concerns with the validity of the datasets, including the "recruitment of participants, administration of measures, reliability of outcome ascertainment, biases in data collection, absence of relevant covariates, and selection of cases analysed in each article." The article from *Retraction Watch* mentions that seventy-one of Eysenck's papers have been listed as of concern. <https://retractionwatch.com/2020/07/08/77-year-old-paper-by-controversial-psychiatrist-hans-eysenck-earns-an-expression-of-concern/>

⁴⁷⁵ Racial Austrians offered a racialised interpretation of Hayek's savanna story to argue that populations reared in warm climates failed to develop higher mental faculties because they did not face the challenges confronted by those living in cooler climates (Slobodian, 2025, 63).

⁴⁷⁶ Slobodian, (2025, 78/79).

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 70

effectively, there should be no need for immigration.⁴⁷⁸ Brimelow appealed to those with leftist sympathies by arguing that immigration is a means for the white elite to ‘prey on their fellow Americans’ to make them even richer through paying lower wages.⁴⁷⁹ This argument is also spurious as there is ample evidence from the USA and elsewhere that immigration actually enriches local populations.⁴⁸⁰ Brimelow espoused the formation of “ethno-states” based on race as a response to his claim that immigration “deconstructs” the homogeneity of the population. Fukuyama on the other hand mentioned the more palatable form of “designer immigration”, where immigrants are selected for their economic utility, using race and culture as proxies.⁴⁸¹

Promoting Libertarianism

While Slobodian (2025) focuses generally on the genealogy of ideas that link market libertarians to social conservatives and the hard right, he also discusses questions relevant to marketing by offering his view of how these ideas developed and spread out from the fringes and into mainstream of political thought in the USA, Europe and South America. His argument is that in addition to individual commitment, the successful marketing of ideas requires organization, funding, a compelling message and a receptive audience.

Taking organization, in providing an account of the ‘often tangled genealogies’ that tie market extremism to social conservative and far-right forces. Nonetheless, some events are more significant than are others. In relation to organization, For instance, Slobodian describes as an important moment the alliance formed in November 1989 between neoliberals and conservatives on the shared assumption that religion, custom and tradition can provide a grounding for society that might otherwise be destroyed by too much freedom. He also notes that from Hayek’s ‘savanna story’, libertarians decided that a purely market-based society is unnatural and cannot exist on its own but requires some form of grounding in tradition, solidarity and identification, the question being how much and to what extent?

Slobodian is well aware that transnational links are undergirded by a dense network of social contacts lubricated by big money.⁴⁸² While a thorough analysis of this issue deserves a book-length treatment in its own right, one set of nodes is formed by a global network of thirty or so Mises Institutes which is supplemented by an interlacing set of “think tanks’ and pressure-groups linked to mainstream politics whose members produce blogs and content for Instagram and TikTok, which are in turn linked to the radical right. Extensive ties exist between those on the right in Europe and in the USA. Amongst

⁴⁷⁸ Slobodian, (2025, 81) mentions that neoliberals had made this argument since the 1930s.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁸⁰ There are lots of potential references that could be cited here. For relatively recent ones see for instance, Dorling, D. (2025). *The next crisis; what we think about the future and what we can do about it*, Verso and also De Haas, H. (2023). *How migration really works*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

⁴⁸¹ Slobodian, (2025, 91).

⁴⁸² Slobodian, (2025, 167).

others, the UK Conservative and Reform parties have links to the US based Heritage Foundation which is heavily funded by fossil fuel interests, including in its “Project 2025” document a proposal to reverse action to tackle global heating and laws based on environmental protection.⁴⁸³

If one is to follow the money, then it seems that with respect to funding, many, if not most roads lead to the Koch brothers who have provided massive funding to counter action against global heating. The British “power” couple Matthew and Sarah Elliott have links to Koch. Matthew Elliott, the chairman of the Vote Leave campaign was at one time associated the ‘second-wave’ financier Howard Shore and founded *Big Brother Watch*, which campaigns against state surveillance; *Business for Britain*, the *New Culture Forum*, and intriguingly, *Conservative Friends of Russia*.⁴⁸⁴ His wife Sarah, the other half of the ‘power-couple’ was reported to have extensive links to the right in the US.⁴⁸⁵ Other links connect James Orr, until recently, a little-known British academic and founder of National Conservatism, to US Vice President J.D. Vance, and to Peter Thiel.⁴⁸⁶ The mention of Thiel reminds that the deepest pockets of all are those of the techno-libertarians such as Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, in whose company billionaire Peter Thiel is small fry.

Slobodian notes a difference between Hayek and Rothbard regarding the target audience for their message. Hayek argued the need to educate the elite against the danger of the centrifugal tendency for society to regress towards socialism, whereas Rothbard argued for the opposite approach, to appeal to the masses.⁴⁸⁷ The success of Rothbard’s prescription has been evident in the extensive use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram in the period prior to the Brexit vote and in the campaigns for Trump.⁴⁸⁸ Simply worded statements such as “Take Back Control” and “Make X Great Again) have found a receptive place in the minds of those who are aghast at the prospect of cuts to benefits that were yesterday regarded as luxuries that are now regarded as necessities and entitlements, who harbour deep resentment, coupled with a sense of exceptionalism and decline relative to the income and status of others. From a theoretical perspective it is worth revisiting Hayek’s “savanna” story, as his argument for the need to sustain the artificial centrifugal force of the “free” market as an antidote to the centripetal pull towards a fictional vision of a ‘primal’ community, is distinctly at odds with such sentiments.

As I see it Slobodian sums up the core libertarian message as modelled on a classic “fear appeal” based on a “deficit-solution” approach where the marketer names the deficit

⁴⁸³ Barnett, A. (2025). Mapped: Donald Trump’s transatlantic anti-green network. *DeSmog*, 21st January.

⁴⁸⁴ Guardian columnist Luke Harding posted a photo on X of Matthew Elliott who was awarded a peerage by Liz Truss, attending an event in Moscow in 2012 which Harding claims was organised by a Russian spy. <https://x.com/lukeharding1968/status/1741029311505952969>

⁴⁸⁵ Farand, C. & M. Mat Hope (2018). Matthew and Sarah Elliott: How a UK Power Couple Links US Libertarians and Fossil Fuel Lobbyists to Brexit. *DeSmog*, 18th November.

⁴⁸⁶ Snowden, P. & A. McElvoy, (2024). Meet JD Vance’s philosopher king. *Politico*, 19th September.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸⁸ Slobodian, (2025, 47).

(“You suffer from halitosis?”),⁴⁸⁹ then offers the magic solution (“Take Listerine!”). The three “H’s” named by Slobodian, (‘hard’ borders, ‘hard’ cultural differences, a ‘hard’ currency) admirably sum up the message, “We will establish hard borders to protect you against the hordes of immigrants who are stealing your jobs and replacing your culture”; “We will put a stop to multiculturalism and affirmative action and instead create a society segregated by education and race”⁴⁹⁰; “We will stop your payday cheque from being further eroded by ‘quantitative easing’ and inflation caused by central bank meddling that benefits the rich”.

Concluding Reflection

This chapter has strayed from a basic introduction to liberalism, including concepts of homo economicus, homo juridicus and homo civicus, to discussion of the neoliberal order, and finally to the rise to prominence of neo-libertarianism and the onset of “culture wars” between this and what it deems to be ‘woke’ politics. In this concluding reflection I want to consider the idea that this shift has been fuelled by the politics of resentment, whether experienced personally, or vicariously and has been amplified by the silos of social media space created in the first instance by the flight of Querdenken coronaskeptics from Youtube and Facebook that flagged and censored their posts to alternative platforms, such as BitChute, DLive, Gab, MeWe, Odyssey, Parler, Periscope, Patreon, Rumble, Substack, Telegram, Twitch, and VK. This is the grey zone where conspiracy theories thrive, where the preservation of identity matters more than that of truth. Resentment at austerity, unequal treatment, loss of privilege and entitlement, fear, and the projection of sadistic impulses towards ‘others’ especially migrants who are reported daily to be flooding the country, the disciplinary power of markets, global heating, war, corruption scandals and even chagrin at how much better roads and facilities seem to be “abroad” compared to “at home”, is stoked by malign actors and exploited by the hostile states of Autocracy Inc.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ From a marketing perspective to say that a person is “suffering from halitosis” is preferable to “bad breath” by adding a pseudo-scientific gloss and the impression that this is an illness. The reference to Listerine is deliberate because it was Gerald Lambert, whose father owned the Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, who discovered the Latin term “halitosis” and used it in their advertising. See, Clarke, L. (2015). How Halitosis Became a Medical Condition With a “Cure”. *Smithsonian Magazine*, 29th January. Cod Latin terms are frequently used by marketers in making dubious health claims today. Pasi Falk, (1994), in a chapter on the genealogy of advertising notes that this focus on problem-solution advertising changed to focus more on the positive register. David Ogilvy was a well-known exponent of the deficit-solution approach. See, Ogilvy, D.; (1983) *Ogilvy on advertising*, Crown.

⁴⁹⁰ Slobodian, (2025, 105).

⁴⁹¹ Applebaum (2024) refers to the extraordinary level of cooperation between autocratic regimes in China, Russia and its satellite states including Belarus, Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba and many others as ‘Autocracy Inc.’ because of their common cause to undermine democracy and to create a new world order based on autocratic rule. The rising power of this axis and the decline of the USA were particularly evident in the meeting that took place between Chinese, Russian and North Korean leaders in Beijing in September 2025, and in the massive military display that accompanied this which was ostensibly to celebrate the anniversary of the Second World War.

Ressentiment, which features in chapter two in the discussion of mimesis⁴⁹² is a relational term which Nietzsche associated with the powerless, in for example denying themselves the goods they are denied by others.⁴⁹³ Ressentiment thus differs from envy as in the latter, the goods one lacks are retained in the imagination as objects of desire. An example of ressentiment in action is the working-class elevation of cheap but filling foods such as oxtail, tripe, pigs' feet and so on that they were once forced to eat by dint of necessity and which they now consume with pride as badges of distinction against the perceived fiddly, foppish unmanly foods prized by the middle-classes. From Nietzsche, Bourdieu (1984) called this *amor fati*, or the love of what one is condemned to, behaviour which John Elster describes as 'sour grapes' in relation to the fable where the fox eventually decided that it never wanted the grapes that it couldn't reach in the first place on account that they were sour.

Jaeggi (2022) quotes Scheler's⁴⁹⁴ argument (which is virtually the same as that of René Girard in relation to external mediation), that ressentiment does not arise in highly structured stable societies that are based on caste or class where individuals accept their status. All that changes in a market society which prizes social mobility, where individuals are constantly told that they are unique, special and able to achieve their wildest dreams whilst also being responsible for their situation. Scheler (and Girard) argued that ressentiment (internal mediation) will be felt especially keenly in a liberal democracy where everyone is told that they are equal because they are accorded equal rights in a country that is otherwise riven by inequalities of wealth, property, and status.

If ressentiment is bound up with powerlessness then how come it is a constant feature of the rhetoric of those in power, employed among many others, by the current presidents of the USA and Russia, who are forever raging about the multifarious humiliations heaped on their suffering citizens by malevolent actors? This might partly be explained in relation to a sense of exceptionalism and entitlement, linked to a sense of real or imaginary loss of greatness in relation to some undeserving other that is experienced as a slight or a humiliation. Jaeggi (2022) extends ressentiment to middle-class experiences, such as that expressed by a male professor against his "woke" students, to argue that it can be experienced by those who are neither objectively deprived, nor objectively powerless.

Identification plays a crucial role here as it enables those born to privilege to assume the status of the victim by identifying with their plight. Pasioka (2024), whose study is mentioned above, describes the vicarious ressentiment expressed by the well-educated, well-to-do participants in her study of the European New Right. She describes their

⁴⁹² For obvious reasons Nietzsche and Girard are scarcely mentioned in the same breath such is their division on questions of Christianity. However it is argued that they can productively be read together. (Blaskow, 2022).

⁴⁹³ Jaeggi, (2022) offers a very finely worked out piece on ressentiment that clearly identifies its key features as at its heart inter-individual, pertaining to social comparison, "what I do not have while others have it". He acknowledges a discrepancy in that ressentiment is linked by Nietzsche to powerlessness, discussing Scheler's argument that this lack of power, 'is something that the individuals in question impose on themselves'. Ressentiment is triggered by impotence and is a refusal to engage in revenge.

⁴⁹⁴ Scheler, Max.(1994). *Ressentiment*. Lewis A. Coser (ed.), William W. Holdheim (Trans.). Marquette University Press.

vision of the “downtrodden” ‘deserving poor’ as based on social class (lower), ethnicity (white, ethnic nationals), and gender (heteronormative). The right-wing mendicants who serve this group can indulge in the pleasures of vicarious resentment by enjoying the vicarious experience of the humiliations experienced by those individuals to whom they provide succour and by venting their splenetic and sadistic impulses onto those other middle-class activists who purportedly serve the neoliberal state by pandering to the “underserving poor”, made up of immigrants and non-whites, LGBTQ+ and other minorities.

While Pasioka (2024) does not mention whether Stazek or the other middle-class informants to her study experienced a sense of dissonance between their privileged position and that of those whose plight they identified with, for those on the left, resentment can involve the active suppression, if not repression, of one’s privilege in the face of anxiety that one’s “real” origins will be discovered by those with a more ‘authentic’ claim to victimhood. Those with actual experience of subordination can thus cannily deploy “authentic” markers of this as a trump card against their privileged counterparts. Thus, ever wary and potentially exposed, the privileged individual must double-down in their identity work and in their expression of vicarious resentment on behalf of those with whom they identify.

The stark implication of all of this for power is that resentment involves social and psychological processes of mimesis, identification, identity work and dissonance which are highly resistant to persuasion by rational argument. This presents something of a challenge to one of my central goals, which is to re-assert the importance of ascertaining the facts as a means to try, so far as possible, to arrive at something close to the truth, or at the very least, to point out factual discrepancies in the accounts offered by others. The prospect for achieving this in situations where identity is at stake is almost impossible, given the likelihood that facts will be tailored so as to fit the prevalent world-view of the protagonist who has as much interest in truth as a fly on the wall. If we are indeed heading towards an era where what might says is right, where the prevalent emotion is fear, what hope can there be for rational discussion and debate in an environment where “silence like a cancer grows”?⁴⁹⁵

From the above, the following chapters six through nine should perhaps be considered redundant, as they describe relations of power that persisted in a bygone era before ‘Big Tech’ got into bed with the US democrats from the Clinton era onwards to ensure that they looked benevolently on regulation of this now poisonous industry. Then along came “Trump-47” like an elephant on the rampage that sought to overturn everything that is consensual and democratic in its wake and ruthlessly trampled over anyone who had contested him.”Artificial Intelligence” has been heralded by leaders as the saviour that will rescue all of humanity from years of stagnation, and is certainly artificial, but has already flung many would-be recruits out of their prospective jobs onto the brink of penury. In the climate-denial of those who know the reality, who are paying billions in their futile bid to to escape the planet they are helping to destroy, these people who unfortunately for

⁴⁹⁵ Line from ‘Sound of Silence’ by Paul Simon, (1966).

the rest of us have read the novels of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling literally. painted by ill-liberal regimes today, whose electorates seem blinded to what is happening right before very eyes, of havoc wrought by massive oscillations in the climate that is wreaking havoc on a grand scale that anyone can observe increasingly before their own eyes but if not then daily on any news channel they may choose of devastation brought on by drought, excessive rainfall, soaring and crashing temperatures, to the extent of threatening to shut down deep sea currents and a crash in the number of species on the planet. Some, such as ultra-messianic 'national christians' actually work towards the apocalypse. At this time of crisis, as it deepens, one wonders, will anything ever be the same again, or are we entering a new epoch?

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Chapter Five: Some Consequences of Neoliberalism

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to open up discussion of some important issues arising from the last chapter. One question concerns the extent to which the market has been the engine for prosperity, as the veritable goose that lays the golden eggs? This can seem obvious, for instance, if one takes the crude measure that the world population has grown eightfold under its provenance. On the other hand, it is impossible to separate out capitalism from modernism as innovations such as the “green revolution” have been enabled as much, if not more, by rapid developments in science and technology, as by the market. While liberals argue that the twin engines of the market and the business corporation have produced unprecedented growth and prosperity, one can delve further to reveal a more complex and troubling story, particularly relating to the extent to which the relative historical prosperity enjoyed by Europe and the USA relative to the rest of the world been due to the market. Additionally, given the huge increase in financial markets, the question arises as to what value is produced by them?

Other questions discussed relate to,

- the ‘trickle-down’ theory used as the basis to justify the accumulation of vast wealth on the basis that as the rich become ever richer, a proportion of their wealth will be transferred to the poor.
- the unbridled growth of the mega-corporation, which is one of the most important developments of the past sixty years. While the existence of these behemoths is now a given, the question arises as to how this was allowed to happen and also if things might have turned out differently?
- the gap between political rhetoric, policy and implementation. A brief look at some events of the past fifty years in the UK reveals a typical pattern of saying one thing whilst doing another and of the sometimes beneficial, sometimes negative role, of unintended consequences.
- the effects on social reproduction and equality of living in a world that continues to be informed by rhetorics of choice and meritocracy. For instance, what are the practical consequences for people where freedom of choice is a mantra and where Gary Becker’s revised notion of rationality as a consistent set of preferences has been realised?
- A movement from corruption in the neoliberal era to kleptocracy today.

The Market as Engine of Prosperity?

It is germane in light of current calls to ‘Make (America, Britain, India, Hungary, Russia ..and so on ad nauseum) Great Again’, to enquire whether any of these entities apart from the first, ever actually achieved greatness off their own bat in the first place, or whether such stories are myths. While in England this call is often associated with

tingoistic nativism, colonialism and nostalgia for an imperial past, it is also tied up with the idea that progress and riches developed from the “free” market principles that enabled an enthusiastic class of strivers to devote themselves to industry and accumulation on this earth as a sign of their heavenly dispensation and grace, which had the unintended spillover effect of benefiting all.

The Liberal Era

Norman (2018) claims that the linked developments of the market system and the corporation led to an upsurge in economic development, wealth and social progress unparalleled in human history, increasing real per capita income in Europe, North America and the Far-East by a factor of thirty since the seventeenth century.⁴⁹⁶ Deirdre McCloskey (2010) argues along similar lines that entirely too much attention has been paid by critics to capitalist accumulation, instead summoning attention to what he calls the “Great Enrichment” that occurred from 1500-1800, driven by the rising bourgeoisie class which effectively undermined the highly stratified class system and unleashed the wave of creativity and innovation that drove progress. Renata Salecl (2011) supplements the argument by Max Weber, that the Calvinist ideal of self-mastery acted as the dynamic motor that drove the progress of early capitalism, adding that this was further popularized in the Victorian era by avid consumption of “rags to riches” stories featuring Horatio Alger, a shadow of which persists in the neoliberal description of the “responsibilized” individual as manager of their own capital.⁴⁹⁷

Related to the above it has been argued that changes in the direction of the free market and rising prosperity motivated the development of a gradually more enlightened sensibility that eventually saw legislation banning the slave trade in Britain in 1807, the emancipation of slaves in 1833, abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846 and the Navigation Acts that protected the mercantilist system, in 1849. That these developments cannot be put down to market forces is, “contrary to popular belief”, as free-market policies have only occasionally followed in Western economies since Smith’s death over two hundred years ago.⁴⁹⁸ Norman’s account accords with findings by Thomas Piketty (2021) who found that free trade was only taken seriously as a subject for discussion in Britain (and in other European countries) *after* the point when its dominant position in the market was unassailable. Piketty explains that the origin of Europe’s wealth and power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not based on the “free” market but rather on a regime of high taxes, colonial exploitation, slavery, and protectionism.

While Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) had argued for low taxes, balanced budgets, respect for property rights and the development of unified and competitive markets, Piketty reminds us that it was many years before his ideas took hold and the situation of exploitation and protectionism remained largely unchanged until the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth

⁴⁹⁶ Norman, (2018, 248).

⁴⁹⁷ Salecl, (2011, 18-22).

⁴⁹⁸ Norman, (2018, 250).

centuries, the British Parliament imposed massive tariffs on textiles from India in order to protect its indigenous cotton industry built on the back of slave colonies located in the West Indies, Brazil and the American South. It has thus been argued that the system of enslavement provided the capital for the Industrial Revolution and moreover, that its abolition had more to do with economic calculation than morality (Williams, 1944; Scanlan, 2011). Against the general current of thought in his day, Adam Smith had criticised slavery on moral grounds, at broadly the same time when luminaries such as John Locke, known by some as the father of human rights, himself held enslaved people.⁴⁹⁹ Given that at the time slaves were understood as commodities equivalent to sacks of coal or bags of potatoes, Smith contended that there was a calculative edge to supposedly moral decisions. For instance he caustically commented that, ‘The late resolution of the Quakers in Pennsylvania to set at liberty all their negro slaves, may satisfy us that their number cannot be very great. Had they made any considerable part of their property, such a resolution could never have been agreed to.’⁵⁰⁰ Smith offered brutally hard-headed reasons for the abolition of slavery, arguing for instance, that, the, “wear and tear” of a slave costs much more than a free servant so all in all, free servants are cheaper than are slaves.⁵⁰¹ Allen (2021) agrees with Smith’s contention that slave owners were motivated by a purely economic logic in giving up their slaves, for which they were richly compensated, at a time when it was cheaper to hire free indentured labour, a hard-headed reality dressed up in the clothes of high moral sensibility.

In case the foregoing might induce a feeling of smug superiority in today’s reader Scanlan (2011, 2016) points out that the tentacles of the slave society continued to reach far into society in Victorian Britain, long after Smith wrote. He draws a striking parallel with the situation of the investor today, providing a cautionary tale for those who criticize the likes of John Locke, perhaps a critical academic enrolled into a well-diversified University pension portfolio, by noting that many slave-owners never visited their plantations and simply checked reports of their balances and returns from their holdings. Crude estimates suggest that there are more slaves today than at any other time in history, a fact we surely must be aware of but perhaps choose to forget or ignore as something that is beyond our capability to address.⁵⁰² Or perhaps we just don’t care!

While Piketty explains that it was only by the mid-nineteenth century that Britain began to adopt a less protectionist policy, Peel’s move to repeal the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846 was motivated by the need to relieve the fallout from the appalling potato famine in Ireland that threatened to destabilize the entire Union. Fraser describes the nineteenth century as the period of liberal capitalism during which economies were constructed and

⁴⁹⁹ Norman, (2018: 209).

⁵⁰⁰ Smith,, in Viner, (1927, 211).

⁵⁰¹ From chapter 8, Of the Wages of Labour, Book 1, *Wealth of Nations*. Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h#chap15>

⁵⁰² The number quoted is fifty million, of which half are men and boys and half women and girls. Forced labour accounts for about 90%, predominantly involving men in construction, manufacturing and agriculture with women in domestic labour. Many are captured by debt peonage (ILO, 2022, ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017).

where production and exchange began to appear to operate autonomously through the balancing of supply with demand. A better name, she suggests, is free trade imperialism, as this was gained at the price of the large-scale exploitation of wage labour at home, and of the plunder of colonial dependencies overseas.⁵⁰³

The situation in the USA was little different to that which prevailed in Britain. Norman quotes Robert Chandler that in the century leading up to 1965 that, ‘there were ten years of competition and ninety years of oligopoly’⁵⁰⁴. Indeed, it was only after the Second World War that the USA, now clearly in the driving seat as the global hegemon, began cautiously to lower trade barriers. Moreover, writing before the imposition of tariffs by the regime of Trump ⁴⁷⁵⁰⁵, he argues that to describe the USA as a free market even then was ‘distinctly quaint’ given the complex regime of tariffs on manufacturing and agriculture, laws on investment. Fraser (2018) describes the period after the establishment of the Bretton-Woods system of capital controls at the end of the Second World War, as state-managed capitalism, involving investment in infrastructure and education. In her account the end of state-managed capitalism was presaged in 1971, with the ending of Bretton-Woods, which left nation states open to the discipline of finance capital. This started a period of transition to the era of finance capitalism we live under today, which is a zombie institution, in that it is theoretically dead but for all practical purposes, very much alive.

That capitalism is a dynamic and sinuous system, forming a complex web of relations with contemporaneous movements in thought and action is possibly most evident in its accommodation what today is known as communism. While the Chinese Communist Party’s view is that given its overarching control, the country is not capitalist, it can be hard to tell the difference. According to one commentator the consumer goods market in China is now larger than that in the USA and there are more billionaires, but no capital gains tax, no social security net and higher levels of inequality.⁵⁰⁶ Added to which, it seems that through organizations such as China Sonangol, the regime has been neither reticent nor slow in digging into what Burgis refers to as the “looting machine” of African resources.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰³ Fraser & Jaeggi, (2018: 74-75).

⁵⁰⁴ Norman, (2018: 250).

⁵⁰⁵ This refers to Trump’s second period as 47th President.

⁵⁰⁶ Ignatius, A. (2021). Americans don’t know how capitalist China is: An interview with Weijian Shan, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June.

⁵⁰⁷ Burgis (2015), mentions China’s policy of offering a “helping hand” to the development of African economies left out in the cold by their ex-colonial masters, with “stupendous” sums of money in building infrastructure in return for resources. He mentions the “usual” complaint about Chinese companies is that they import their own workers and where they do employ locals, they pay them poorly and offer poor working conditions.

The Neoliberal Era

From the 1980s onwards, neo-conservative governments reversed policies of progressive taxation and redefined relationships with the global South. Large multinational corporations and affluent minorities took this change in policy as a vehicle to cut costs by hiring cheap labour, avoiding tax and evading regulations. Neoliberal ideas were promoted and indeed enforced by the IMF and World Bank through “structural adjustment programmes” informed by the Washington Consensus. Consequently, governments across large swathes of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa were subjected to disciplines of shrinking the state, budget austerity and deregulation. In the UK, a nascent “shareholder democracy”, was created through privatisation of nationalised industries to citizens who applied for shares. This reached its zenith in the notorious and ultimately scandalous foray by Harvard University into the post-Soviet economy.⁵⁰⁸

Opening up to global competition had winners and losers. There is little doubt that the expansion of the global market has raised the living standards for millions. One of the key Millennium Development Goals devised by the United Nations was to eradicate world poverty by 2015.⁵⁰⁹ Although this goal was not reached, definite progress had been made between 1990 and 2015, when an estimated two billion people were removed from the category of low human development and one billion from crushing poverty. This impressive figure was tempered by the related fact that half of workers and their families in developing countries continued to survive on less than four dollars a day and eight-hundred million on less than two dollars a day. Trentmann (2016) contends that Indian peasants were glad to be referred to as customers as this afforded them a sense of recognition they would otherwise have lacked. Moreover, he points to the success of consumer politics that developed in the context of weak state control and how consumer groups organized to challenge the state when basic services such as electricity failed⁵¹⁰. He suggests that the effects of neoliberalism on India have been double-edged in that choice and competition have superseded Gandhi’s values self-sufficiency and ascetism, yet that Gandhi’s spirit persists in calls for social inclusion and the call of the poor in 2007 to stand up for their rights as consumers.⁵¹¹

During the same period once prosperous areas in the UK and Europe were reduced to rustbelts. Steel production in the USA and the UK hit a peak in 1970 and gradually softening relations with China led to the transfer of production overseas, with no plan put in place to soften the blow to local communities. Consequently, in 2016 China produced eight times more steel than Japan, India and the USA and one hundred times more than

⁵⁰⁸ In 1992 the Russian government began issuing certificates with a face value of 10,000 roubles each to all of the 148 million citizens of the country. A fuller account of events is provided by McLintock (2006).

⁵⁰⁹ Source: United Nations (2015). *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)

⁵¹⁰ Trentmann, (2016, 388).

⁵¹¹ See Trentmann, (2016, 388-393)

the UK.⁵¹² The decline of the UK textile and clothing industry began from 1945 when it became subjected to competition from abroad. The industry later enjoyed a measure of protection through the Multifibre Arrangement signed in 1973, which established quotas that were subsequently deemed contrary to the principles laid down by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). This led to an interim phase allowing some protections to remain in place from 1995, “to allow exporters and importers to adjust”, with full integration to GATT rules in 2005. The industry had been sheltered by the presence of Marks and Spencer, a dominant retailer that prided itself on its relationships with UK manufacturers. Overall, with the exception of Italy, the industry declined sharply across Europe from the 1990s.⁵¹³

Middle-class wealth also in fell in Western Europe with the temporary drop in the value of housing, whilst the value of stocks flatlined. Additionally, although productivity in developed countries rose consistently from the 1980s, this was not met by corresponding increases in real wages, which stagnated. Poverty rates remained high in the USA, averaging 14% but rising to 18% for children and 30% for blacks.⁵¹⁴ Median wealth in the USA “plummeted over the years such that by 2010 was at its lowest level since 1969” (Wolf, 2012), while in contrast, the financial crash benefitted rich stockholders, with one percent of the population taking 95% of the growth in the US economy.⁵¹⁵

It can be hard to believe statements that in the UK hunger is a bigger problem than it has been for the past fifty years⁵¹⁶. Before the Millennium you could count the number of food banks on the fingers of one hand, while now there are thousands. Launched in the UK in 2010, the food bank is now a fixture in every local community, involving thousands of volunteers collecting, storing and distributing over three million food bags annually. A recent claim that seven million people live with food insecurity which has been exacerbated as inflation exceeds rises in benefit allowances. The food bank ‘industry’ has since expanded to include ‘clothes banks’, ‘hygiene banks’, ‘heating banks’ and seemingly inevitably, ‘multi-banks’.

At least one group must have been thriving under capitalism and indeed it seems that investors have had it good. The market has generated extraordinary returns for investors, with one dollar invested in 1900 worth in 2024 terms in the USA, \$107,409 (\$2,911 in real terms) or in the UK, \$53, 980 (\$690 in real terms).⁵¹⁷ Laying aside questions pertaining to the environmental and social damage done in its name, such growth has been anything but smooth. While since 2000, the average return on equities was 3.5%, this has masked huge volatility, swinging from returns of over 10% in fourteen years to negative growth

⁵¹² Rhodes, C. (2017). UK steel, decades of decline, House of Commons Library, 17th December. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-steel-decades-of-decline/>

⁵¹³ Owen & Jones, (2003); Toms & Zhang, (2016).

⁵¹⁴ Source: Irvin, (2008: 16)

⁵¹⁵ Source: O’Brien, (2014).

⁵¹⁶ Brown, Gordon, (2024). How Britain became a food bank nation. *The Guardian*, 11th June.

⁵¹⁷ Dimson, Marsh & Staunton (2025) summary edition Fig. 30, p. 7.

over eleven years. Indeed the dotcom crash of March 2000 led to a real term loss of 49 percent such that it took until October 2006 for investors to recoup losses and between March 2007 and March 2009 equities fell by 47% in real terms. The authors of the report note drily that “good investment decisions based on sensible criteria sometimes can have disappointing outcomes”⁵¹⁸ and that given volatility, the much vaunted “long-run” can be a very long time indeed.⁵¹⁹ As John Plender⁵²⁰ argues the cycle of boom and bust is repeating itself as I write as the crazy market bubble that has built up through 2025 makes a nonsense of the efficient market hypothesis that the market is always correctly priced. In years to come people may scratch their heads over the feverish race propelled by FOMO that developed around Nvidia and crypto “assets”, just as they recently did over historic examples such as the South Sea Bubble and Tulip Fever.

There’s Many A Slip: When (Neoliberal) ideas hit the (Policy) road.

In what will be cold comfort for those involved, according to Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2025), the Thatcher government neither intended to “accidentally” destroy the British manufacturing base through the imposition of crippling interest rates, nor to unleash the financial power of private home ownership, of which more later. There is no doubt about the deep and lasting influence exerted by neoliberal ideas on politicians of all stripes as reflected in the policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank. Milton Friedman was adviser to Nixon and Reagan, Robert Lucas’s ideas were promulgated widely amongst central bankers, Gary Becker was on the advisory board of the CATO Institute, a right-wing think tank, and Patrick Minford was a close adviser of Margaret Thatcher. That said, it is worth noting that few academic theories survive the passage to policy formation, legislative approval and implementation unscathed, given they are subject to scrutiny and are appropriated to fit the vision of whomsoever seeks to promote them. Most are radically changed and even following legislation when policy levers are pulled, there may be little traction as they may not be linked to real engagement on the ground. To determine in retrospect whether or not a particular policy was successful or not is difficult, not least because words may live long on the lips of the politicians long after the policies they signify have failed.

The aims of the Thatcher government in the UK that came to power in 1979 were to reduce the size of the state and to privatize nationalised industries; to create a culture of self-reliant individuals based on small business enterprise and responsibility; to ensure ‘sound money’; promote home-ownership; and to cultivate a ‘shareholder democracy. In the UK the justification for the introduction of market principles by privatising public services was that overmanned, loss-making industries would be transformed into customer-centred enterprises and overall, the system would become leaner and more efficient.⁵²¹ According to Parker (2004), it was ‘far from clear’ that UK politicians at the

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁵²⁰ Plender, J. (2025). It’s fear not greed that drives the stock market. *Financial Times Money*, 26th July, 6-7.

⁵²¹ See for example, Pack, (1987).

time understood the economic arguments for privatisation, and a subsequent review found little evidence that performance had improved and indeed in some industries it had declined (Martin & Parker, 1997). The authors argue that each industry is structurally different and additional factors include the effectiveness of regulation and the intensity of competition. While generally prices in utilities such as the electricity market declined in real terms these rose substantially in the less competitive water industry. The labour force shrank and although service quality was generally maintained, a widening gap opened up between the pay of skilled and unskilled workers as industries de-unionised. Profits rose, leading to huge rises in remuneration packages for senior management. Parker offers two main reasons as to why some of the aims of privatization failed to materialize. Firstly, quasi-markets are not real markets and companies unsurprisingly focused more on hitting targets than on satisfying their customers. Secondly, whether mindful of Friedman's argument that the sole responsibility of business is to its shareholders, under a benign regime of lax regulation, customers lost out as utilities paid out billions in dividends to their shareholders whilst neglecting their core responsibilities.⁵²² In relation to the water industry this became clear to when those swimming in the once pristine waters of Lake Windermere or surfed the beaches of the south coast of England discovered that they were up to their necks in a sea of effluent.

In relation to 'sound' money, the UK Thatcher government and the incoming Reagan administration in the USA were committed to monetarism. The policy advocated by Milton Friedman was informed by the quantity theory of money, one of the oldest economic doctrines that once undergirded arguments for the preservation of the gold standard.⁵²³ For conservatives this offered a compelling alternative to Keynesian-style interventions that had failed to curb rapidly rising inflation in the 1970s. The solution seemed simple, neatly summed in Irving Fisher's equation of exchange $MV = PT$ which posits that if money is made scarce, then purchasing power will rise and inflation will fall. In the USA, monetarist policy was initiated by the Carter administration in 1979 through the appointment of the monetarist Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank. Later, under the auspices of the Reagan regime, Volcker abruptly switched horses from controlling the growth of money, to ruthlessly squashing inflation and investment by raising interest rates to 22%. In the UK, the monetarist experiment was similarly brief, described by Margaret Thatcher's private secretary for economic affairs as, "one of the most unsatisfactory episodes of economic policy-making of modern times", a fact to which the 'iron lady' stubbornly refused to admit.⁵²⁴

Following the failure of monetarism, despite massive government spending on defence, rather than giving way to Keynesian, the fortunes of neoliberalism were revived in the US by the wide dissemination of Lucas's argument that the market alone can reach an optimum solution if firms and consumers are allowed to get on with acting rationally in

⁵²² Parker, (2004).

⁵²³ Humphrey, (1974).

⁵²⁴ Quote from Tim Lankester, in Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F. (2025). It's a shitshow, London Review of Books, 8th May, p. 29. Review of Lankester, T. (2024). Inside, Thatcher's monetarist experiment: the promise, the failure, the legacy, Policy Press,

their self-interest without outside interference from the state. That markets are always in equilibrium because individuals maximise their lifetime utility, seemed persuasive to policy makers given it was based on complex mathematics and thus carried an aura of scientific rigour. It also constituted a clear warning to government, to *laissez-faire*, or steer clear. This potent myth avers that intervention in markets is dangerous as when left to itself the market will self-correct. Proponents cite Adam Smith as the originator of this idea on the grounds that he argued that markets are dynamic, as they are responsive to the price mechanism which incentivizes producers to make no more than consumers' demand. In this view, when left to its own, the market should re-balance and gravitate towards a "natural price". In such conditions, competition is supposed to act as the spur to keep profits to a minimum, which is desirable in a rich country, although the equilibrium or balancing point will constantly change as the market shifts. Norman argues that Smith recognized 'of course markets are often not free, calm or competitive', attacking the behaviour of the large merchants of his day who connived to conspire against their customers and to keep wages low for labourers.⁵²⁵ Thus Smith was alive to the fact that the market will only sometimes be in equilibrium and additionally, he was well aware of the pernicious influence of producers on the government of his day.

According to Alan Blinder, once vice-chairman of the US Federal Reserve, it would be a step too far to conflate neoliberal rhetoric such as the above with the conduct of actual policy on the ground.⁵²⁶ Blinder, who was involved in policy formation for years, argues that despite their enthusiastic espousal of neoliberal ideas, policy makers often chose to ignore them and there were large swings in policy from one administration to the next. For instance, he describes how Alan Greenspan who was chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank during the Clinton era and an acolyte of Ayn Rand, tolerated the administration's use of fiscal policy over a period of almost twenty years. Blinder blamed the "grotesque" Great Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007/8 - which Robert Lucas had once argued could never happen - on two causes; the egregious misbehaviour of individuals and firms in the financial markets; and the disastrous failure of successive governments to regulate the sector, pointing to the continuing influence of Lucas's argument for '*laissez-faire*'.⁵²⁷

Blinder concludes from the massive bailout of financial institutions that happened after 2008, that when the chips are down it is Keynesianism that will ride to the rescue. According to Geoff Mann, this underestimates the extent to which "new" Keynesian thinking has incorporated neoliberal ideas such as the rational expectations hypothesis.⁵²⁸ There has since been a distinctive "chop and change" approach to policy as a consequence of ideological divisions between different parties and because governments are riven by internal disputes between free marketers and technocrats. For

⁵²⁵ Norman, (2018, 97-98).

⁵²⁶ Blinder, (2022).

⁵²⁷ The first and most obvious reason was the egregious misbehaviour of firms and individuals in the financial markets.

⁵²⁸ Mann, (2023). Keynesianism in a foxhole. *London Review of Books*, 13th April: 34.

instance, while the ideas of Kahneman and Thaler cut through to the highest levels with the establishment of “nudge” units in the US and the UK,⁵²⁹ the US nudge unit was disbanded by Trump-45 and the UK Cameron government partially privatised the UK behavioural insights team it had established.

A second strand of the Thatcher vision was the creation of a ‘shareholder democracy’ comprising ‘investor citizens’, acting as mini-capitalists who would build and maximise their portfolios. The policy succeeded to the extent that millions of citizens availed of lucrative inducements to purchase shares in telecommunications, water and electricity at knock-down rates. However, this was a far cry from those involved starting to build portfolios and actively trading in the market. As one author described the outcome, rather than creating a society of ‘investor citizens’ consisting of small business entrepreneurs and investors, these individuals became ‘investor consumers’ of products offered by major financial services and insurance companies thus increasing the size and power of these institutions.⁵³⁰

While home ownership was another ideal shared by the Thatcher administration in 1979, the government initially had no intention of stimulating the market by allowing banks to move into the mortgage market. Recognising that banks might try to enter the lucrative mortgage market which had up until then been a cartel, if it abolished exchange controls, the Chancellor urged the banks to refrain from doing so. The government abolished exchange controls - and the banks promptly ignored his plea and pressed ahead to enter the market. An insider commented that at the time Thatcher, ‘discovered to her surprise, that the rapid expansion of mortgage credit, and house price inflation, was a solution and not a problem’.⁵³¹ Those in the fortunate position to buy felt rich using equity release to engage on a spending spree on furnishings, home-improvements and durables, thus relieving the government from the need to borrow to stimulate the economy, “Keynesianism had been privatised’.⁵³² However it might be argued that this act along with the 1980 Right to Buy scheme, which allowed tenants of social housing to purchase the homes they lived in at low prices, formed the foundation for the property based rentier capitalism of today, when almost three million individuals are landlords.

Finance Capital

The finance sector played a central role in the development of markets in the twentieth century. Stuart Ewen (1976) writes of the allure of consumer credit for early consumers who were promised that they could realize their dreams right now, only to be subjected to

⁵²⁹ More properly known as, “The Social and Behavioral Insights Team” (US) and “Behavioural Insights Team” (UK).

⁵³⁰ Jackson, B. (2023). I do a deal right away, Review of Edwards, E. (2023). Are we rich yet? The rise of mass investment culture in contemporary Britain. *London Review of Books*, 16th March, 42.

⁵³¹ Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F. (2025). It’s a shitshow, *London Review of Books*, 8th May, p. 30 col. 4. Review of Lankester, T. (2024). Inside, Thatcher’s monetarist experiment: the promise, the failure, the legacy, Policy Press,

⁵³² Ibid., 30.

the disciplinary power of constant indebtedness. Dholakia (2012) provides an overview of the growth of finance capital in the USA from the instalment plans of the early 1900s to the maxed-out credit cards today. Yet as noted by Mazzucato (2018), until the 1970s, the financial sector was not included in estimates of GDP as it was considered unproductive, because it acted merely as a distributor of funds and not as a creator of value. Karl Marx located finance in the circulation sector as a catalyst that transforms money capital into production capital. In his scheme, because all value is created by productive labour, financiers do not create value but take a portion of the surplus value created by producers. Although marginal economists disagreed with Marx on just about everything else, they broadly shared the idea that financial services are unproductive. However, following extensive lobbying by the industry, deregulation in the early 1970s ensured that where they once counted for nothing, the activities of banks came to be included in national accounts.

One thing that Margaret Thatcher did intend to do, according to Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2025), was to “unleash the entrepreneurial spirit” of the City of London following “Big Bang” in 1986. This decision is best understood in the context of changes in the international context which ended, ‘an elaborate network of exchange controls, withholding taxes, barriers to foreign entry, restrictions on novel forms of financial instruments and direct controls on overseas investment.’⁵³³ What value does finance capital create? In January 2024, one year before Donald Trump was elected for a second term, the Bretton Woods Committee reported two pieces of related news. On the one hand financial markets were “euphoric”, boosted by prospects for AI and the profits of some US companies which had grown by 8.6%, while on the other, they noted a “negative output gap” in relation to the real economy which grew by just 1.2% in January.⁵³⁴ According to one estimate the global markets in 2024 amounted to over one quadrillion dollars of which commodities such as tea and pork bellies, amounted to \$3.7 trillion dollars. Put it another way, the total value was over \$1000,000,000,000,000 of which commodities were 3,700,000,000,000.⁵³⁵ I must admit that I am more or less completely stumped, not only by such incomprehensible figures that like the concept of light years, are beyond my ken, but also by exotic products such as Synthetic Collateralised Debt Obligations (CDOs), Collateralised Loan Obligations (CLOs) and Credit Default Swaps (CDS's). Fears of my stupidity were somewhat mollified but my anxiety increased when I learned from reading *Liar's Poker* (1989) and *The Big Short* (2010) that most of those people who actually deal in these products tend to be vain, inglorious and rather stupid. This does not make one sleep easier in one's bed, especially given the

⁵³³, Plender, (1987).

⁵³⁴ Radulescu, A., (2024). The gap between the real and financial sides of the economy. *Bretton Woods Committee*, Mon, 22nd April.

⁵³⁵ Sopolnitskiy, L. (2024). The size of global markets 2024: Market dynamics, asset class shifts, insights. *LSEG*. https://www.lseg.com/content/dam/data-analytics/en_us/documents/charts/lseg-size-of-global-market-2024-in-charts.pdf According to Sopolnitskiy (2024) commodities accounted for \$3.7 trillion. Credit markets were reported to have tripled since 2018 with corporate bonds at \$39 trillion, credit derivatives \$18 trillion, structured finance, \$18 trillion and syndicated loans, \$9 trillion. Loan funding grew by 36% in 2023.

news that the value of the world crypto market had reached \$3 trillion in November 2023, rising to \$4 trillion by mid-July, 2025.

What is it about financialization? Since the mid-1980s there has been a move away by those in financial services from a personal understanding of their customers and the bricks and mortar of their businesses towards abstraction, technological innovation, quantitative modelling and increasing intermediation. The economist John Kay mentions that even back in 1995 when he attended a Board meeting of the Halifax building society, then the world's largest mortgage lender, it was proposed that the Treasury function should not just serve the needs of the business by taking deposits from savers and lending to home-buyers but should expand its activities by trading in the money markets. Given that the aggregate value of debt securities and currencies is fixed, lending this activity the quality of a zero-sum game, Kay asked bluntly who would lose the money the Halifax would make? A master of understatement, Kay described the reaction of the Board as "not quite polite" and how he was "re-educated" that Halifax would make more money because its traders were smarter!⁵³⁶ Kay was of course right, presaging the doom spiral that Halifax was subsequently caught up in following its merger with the Bank of Scotland.

Mazzucato (2018) argues that the financialization of modern capitalism is dysfunctional. As a consequence of de-regulation, trade in financial instruments is many times today greater than the trade in products. She argues that finance capitalists act as rent seekers, using their position as intermediaries to extract a significant share of revenue without playing an active role in production or job creation. Rent is extracted in the difference between the fees of asset managers and the actual risks they face, in the activities of private equity funds that load their acquisitions with debt, and through the proliferation of hedge funds and credit default swaps.

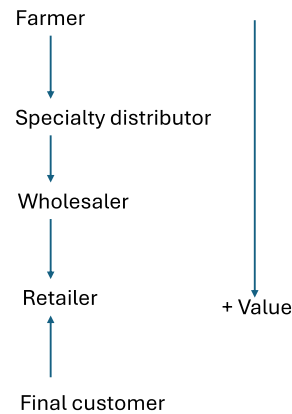
The next two diagrammes aim to illustrate some of the complexities involved. In the following, (A) depicts the situation where producers and consumers transact in a local marketplace while (B) illustrates the more abstract situation where wholesalers play a key role, adding value by sorting, storing, packaging and distributing produce to retailers.

⁵³⁶ Kay, (2015: 106-107).

(A) Farmer's Market



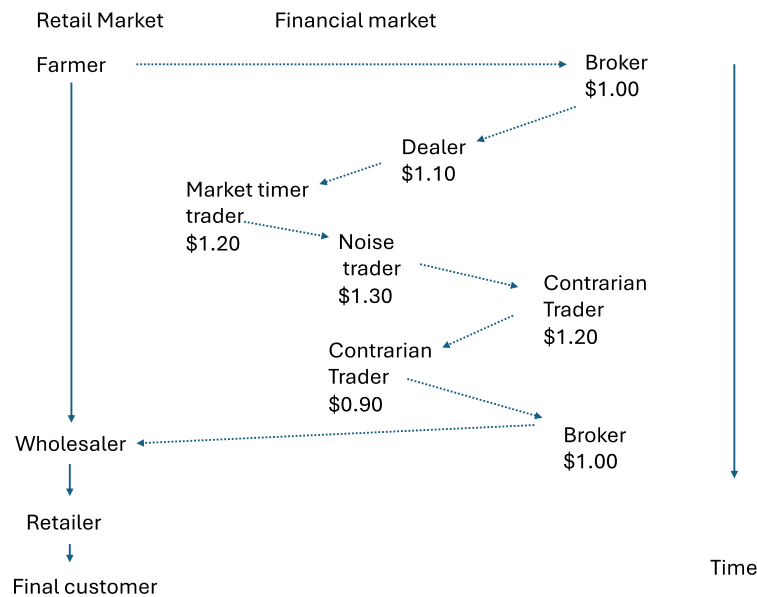
(B) Retail Market



The diagram on the left-hand-side shows the simplest situation where farmers and customers transact in local markets whereas that on the right-hand-side describes the more remote situation where the customer visits a supermarket. As discussed in chapter three academics from the Wisconsin School were particularly concerned to study the power in the retail sector, particularly that which enabled large intermediaries to dictate terms to farmers and consumers.

The next diagramme illustrates part of the complex web of financial transactions that can be involved which themselves create zero value.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁷ This is based on an example provided by John Lanchester (2024). The farmer of mangoes needs cash now so rather than waiting for harvest he sells them in advance to a broker for a dollar a crate. The broker then sells the rights to the crop to a dealer who has heard a rumour that mangoes may be scarce and pays £1.10 a crate for the privilege. A “market-time” trader has heard a similar rumour and buys them for \$1.20 a crate. A rather naïve “noise” trader then cottons on to the trend and buys in at \$1.30. However as signs appear that the crop will be plentiful, a contrarian trader short-sells the mangoes at \$1.20. Another speculator learns that the harvest is likely to be abundant and further shorts the price to \$0.90. At this point the original broker steps in and buys them for \$1.00. Up until this point no value has been created and it only does so when the real mangoes actually pass into the distribution chain.



For Perry Anderson (2025), the neoliberal order has had its day and is irredeemably broken; “Everywhere the scene is one of instability, insecurity, unpredictability... All is disorder under the heavens.”⁵³⁸ In response to the 2008 financial crash and Covid, government resorted with policies “that were anathema to its doctrine.” Since then, excepting China, GDP has fallen and incomes have remained flat as economies float precariously on a surging sea of debt. Anderson notes that since then debt-fuelled GFC of 2008 public debt in the United States tripled, rising by seventeen trillion dollars in the period to 2024, “an increase equivalent to that in the past 240 years”, while in the OECD, total sovereign debt that stood at \$28 trillion in 2008 had risen to \$56 trillion in 2024. Moreover, the international regime that in 2008 had almost drowned in the sea of debt it had created, ‘is drenching itself with a still larger flood of debt, with no end in sight’. Sooner rather than later there will be a momentous shock to the system.

The Rise and Rise of the Mega-Corporation

As mentioned in chapter one, the paradox at the heart of consumer power is that while as an individual one may feel isolated and disempowered, millions of people making independent choices can unknowingly exert power over any corporation, no matter how large. That is the logic of the market. On the other hand, if the choice is between Amazon or Amazon, what kind of choice is that? Given the influence and the animosity expressed by anarcho-liberals and neo-libertarians towards ‘bigness’ mentioned in the last chapter, how was it that these corporations managed to reach the size they have attained today which is preposterous, even by the standards of the early twentieth century? Robert Dahl (1989) who expressed concern thirty and more years ago over the

⁵³⁸ All quotes in this section are from Anderson, (2025, 8).

threat posed to democracy by the growing power of multinational corporations would no doubt be extremely concerned today. There has been much talk of “Bigness” in the media in recent years, about the power of Big Tobacco, Big Tech, Big Sugar, Big Pharma and so on. “Bigness” is of social concern today, not only for anti-capitalists but for liberals who fear the pernicious threat of these unaccountable and undemocratic entities to the basis of our fragile democracy. Reading through papers by critical marketing academics I have been struck that participants can seem to be bothered more by the size and remoteness of corporations than by the more abstract notion of capitalism.⁵³⁹

Dahl argued that the growing size and lack of accountability of business poses a direct threat to democratic institutions arguing that the corporate leviathans of his time and the individuals who managed and owned them were beyond the legal jurisdiction and reach of the nation-state. He argued for the introduction of industrial democracy in order to make them more accountable, with the bonus that this would also bolster equality within society by distributing profits more widely and helping to flatten the otherwise huge differentials in income between those best and worst paid in the corporation (Dahl, 1985: 106). Moreover, as is discussed further in the next chapter, he argued that property rights should be subservient to the protection of the integrity of the democratic process on the grounds that that large corporations are in principle public because they have social goals, questions about which are matters for discussion and collective determination in the public forum by processes that satisfy the criteria of procedural democracy.⁵⁴⁰

The size and scale of firms within industries today such as FAANG dwarf those of Dahl’s time with assets larger than the GDP of many countries, a concentration wealth of such vast proportions that contemporary authors concur with Dahl that they threaten the democratic basis of society (Zuboff, 2019). It is common to believe that no matter how diverse their locations, nor how many thousands of individuals they employ, these MNCs are discrete organizations. However, as Gucci (2022) points out, despite that these corporations act as unitary entities informed by a central guiding mission, objectives and strategy, they do not exist as entities in law. As discussed more fully in the next chapter there is a fundamental difference between corporate and legal entities (Robé, 2016). Some, such as Coca Cola engage in supplier-dealer franchises in each of the territories in which they operate, enabling the corporation to transfer blame for negative issues that arise onto locals.⁵⁴¹ Amazon, which is owned by a number of entities, including its founder Jeff Bezos employs one million five-hundred thousand employees and has over one hundred subsidiaries. Even an integrated firm such as the oil giant Total has nine hundred subsidiaries and affiliates each of which is a separate legal entity and so subject to the specific laws of the jurisdiction in which it is incorporated. Such is the legal complexity, that even laying aside the massive resources commanded by these organizations which include entire teams of legal experts that can be deployed against

⁵³⁹ See for example Kozinets (2002). I can come up with others if need be.

⁵⁴⁰ Dahl, R.A. (1998), *On Democracy*.

⁵⁴¹ Does Coca-Cola franchise in the UK? <https://www.pointfranchise.co.uk/articles/does-coca-cola-franchise-6146/>

those whom they deem a threat, it is incredibly difficult for others to take these corporations to task.

In light of the above, given the size and lack of accountability of these massive corporations, it is pertinent to ask how, if liberals such as Adam Smith held free market competition between a plurality of firms in such high regard, have such behemoths come into being? The accumulation of the power of large corporations and industries strikes as odd given Adam Smith's scathing criticism of the corrupt, self-serving mercantilist system of his time, for which he prescribed the antidote of free-market competition. Given this, one might have thought that a robust system of law was quickly enacted to regulate national and cross-national markets to ensure a robust and fair competitive arena, comprising many players. Yet over one hundred years after publication of *Wealth of Nations*, the US regulatory system was so lax that oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller was able to gain control of the entire oil and railroad industries. Driven by a ruthless quest for efficiency, Rockefeller was accused of ruining competitors by engaging in predatory pricing through reducing the price of kerosene below the average industry cost. A difficulty for regulators, which many will recognize today, was that the corporate structure of Standard Oil was so complex that it was almost impossible for investigators to understand its operation. Following years of litigation, the courts ordered Standard Oil to dissolve in 1882, but continued trading regardless, forcing Congress to legislate to curb its activities. A demonstration of Rockefeller's command of resources was that while The Sherman Antitrust Act came into force in 1890, it was only in 1910 that Standard Oil was finally broken up.

One might argue that the Sherman Act fell short of Adam Smith's aim in that it did not ban monopolies outright but rather introduced the "rule of reason" according to which it is permissible for a firm to dominate a market so long as its actions are considered to be fair and in the public interest. The US position on competition law is influential, not only on account of its considerable economic power, but because it was the first to legislate. It was only in the 1990s that antitrust laws became widespread around the world such that today around half of its countries have established a regulatory institution. In the country of Smith's birth, competition was regulated by common law until 1948 and only became codified in 1998. While there are few studies of the effectiveness of regulation, that by Petersen (2011) of 154 countries, spanning the period from 1964 to 2007, found that the presence of an anti-trust institution in a given country improves that country's economic growth, although it has no effect on democracy.

Robert Bork: Influence on the Regulatory Environment

The following discussion refers to some fairly detailed legal references which provide context for a complex series of arguments. In the USA, the Sherman Act (1890) classified antitrust offences into two categories. Horizontal antitrust offences involve two or more competitors who collude to set the market price of a product that each company produces. Vertical antitrust actions on the other hand, involve price-fixing within a supply-chain, between manufacturers, suppliers and distributors. For instance, in a US vertical antitrust case conducted in 1947, the lessor of patented salt-dispensing machines agreed

to lease its machines so long as lessees used the lessor's salt. The Supreme Court followed the principle established by the Sherman Act to find that tying sales of salt to those of the machines was illegal and effectively created a monopoly (Carlton & Waldman, 2014: S123). Until the 1960s the prevailing view of the US courts was of inhospitality to vertical and horizontal arrangement, that 'Big is Bad'.

While it is unusual to single out one individual as the main influence for the creation of the vast concentration of economic power we see around us today, the jurist Robert Bork stands out as a candidate. Bork, a graduate of the Chicago School criticized US court judgements on competition law in the 1960s, by arguing that the law should be based on knowledge of market principles. Bork believed that markets are always efficient and argued that interpretations of the Sherman Act by the courts had led to judgements that protected inefficient business and thus damaged the interests of consumers. In this he had an unlikely ally in the figure of Ralph Nader, who was a champion for consumer rights.

Bork's arguments were summarised in *The Antitrust Paradox* (Bork, 1978). In relation to the case of the salt machine manufacturer discussed above, Bork insisted that this was not a monopoly and that it was more likely that by tying sales of salt machines to salt, the market would become more efficient. He further argued that in the case of such complementary products, even if there is market power in the tying product, the tie should not be regarded as an antitrust violation because it creates no additional market power in the tied-goods market.

In 1979, the US Supreme Court accepted Bork's argument that the Sherman Act is centrally about protecting the consumer. The focus then shifted from that of protecting a multiplicity of small business competitors to one of operational efficiency. Bork agreed that horizontal agreements should generally be regarded as anti-competitive, but that most vertical agreements are likely to act in the interests of efficiency. This effectively reversed the longstanding practice since the Sherman Act of "Big is Bad", under which vertical agreements were illegal. From the 1970s onwards, the US courts adopted the perspective that tying is never anticompetitive and should never be regarded as an antitrust violation. Practices engaged in by a number of businesses from Seely mattresses to car manufacturers which tied regional dealerships to the company and would once have been illegal, were now regarded as legitimate.

Bork exerted enormous influence on judgements made in competition law in the USA and beyond. Matthews (2012), argues that without Bork the old rule of inhospitality to big business would still be in force and so there would be no Dotcom and so no FAANG, as the World Wide Web as we know it is dominated by economies of scale. As an example of his influence, from the 1990s, judgements allowed agreements on resale price maintenance between a manufacturer and its authorized dealers, a practice that had been banned since 1911. In later years Bork shifted the basis of his argument. He had earlier argued against the view that tying can leverage a monopoly position in the tying market into the market for the tied good and that tying can reduce production and distribution costs, such that if it raised efficiency, there could be no antitrust violation. However, in *United States vs. Microsoft Corporation* (2001) he contended that Microsoft's tying of

Internet Explorer to the Windows operating system did not create a monopoly of the browser market but rather acted to preserve Microsoft's Windows monopoly. His argument rested on his belief that Netscape, when coupled with Sun Microsystems Java language could be developed as a substitute for Windows, thus constituting a threat to the Windows monopoly. He thus argued that Microsoft acted to preserve and not extend a monopoly position and so it had acted illegally as it constituted an attempt to preserve an existing monopoly position. For those interested I next provide a summary of the background to the case.

United States vs. Microsoft Corporation (2001)

At a time when many markets, not least that of IT are dominated by a few huge players, it is understandable for individuals to believe that antitrust laws are not working. The cases taken by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and then the Department of Justice (DOJ) against the Microsoft Corporation are illustrative. Although Tim Berners Lee had released the World Wide Web onto the internet in 1991, it was only in 1993 that Microsoft got its own internet server. The launch of the Netscape Navigator browser came as a shock to Microsoft, as Netscape quickly achieved a 90% share of the market. Microsoft responded in 1995 by developing its inhouse browser, Internet Explorer (IE) which was bundled with Windows, so that it became the default option for all PC users. By 2000, IE had a 95% market share and Netscape had gone. Microsoft succeeded in ruining Netscape but in the process it almost caused its own demise, as its actions precipitated a series of anti-trust actions.

Microsoft became the target for American regulators in the early 1990s for operating a monopoly, (the company had a 95% share of the INTEL based PC market) by tying a diverse range of software into its Windows operating system. Microsoft refused to release information to other software developers enabling them to develop software to run on Windows. The FTC investigation was dropped after a couple of years but was replaced by a Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation that resulted in a major legal battle, the upshot of which was that in 2000 AD, a court ruling held that Microsoft should be split into an operating system business and an application business. However, this was subsequently rejected on appeal and "shortly thereafter, the Department of Justice, recently restaffed with appointments made by the Bush administration announced that it would not pursue its original aim of breaking up Microsoft and also decided to abandon the claim that Microsoft had engaged in illegal tying".

Despite a broadly similar antitrust policy, the European Commission's investigation of Microsoft took a different turn. Where the US investigation accused Microsoft of tying its browser to its operating system, the EU investigation, which began in 2000 focused on its tie of the media player. Microsoft was fined €497,196,304. An appeal by Microsoft failed and in 2017 the company was fined an additional €899,000,000 million for failing to comply. Microsoft was also fined €561,000,000 in March 2013 for tying its web browser to its operating system and not acting to remedy this. While these fines may seem huge, they should be weighed against Microsoft's revenue. Sales in 2017 were reported at 89,950,000,000 and net income at \$12,193,000,000, so the \$899,000,000 million fine amounted to 1% of turnover and just over 7% of net income for that year. This did little

to dent Microsoft's growth, with reported sales revenue in 2021 of \$168,000,000,000 and net income of \$61,270,000,000.

Since the Microsoft case, mergers have been allowed to progress with minimal interference from regulators. As a consequence it is argued that in many markets companies have grown so large that they can keep prices high and wages low.⁵⁴² A consequence of the dominant narrative inspired by Bork and others from Harvard, that it is sufficient for the courts to focus on a narrow conception of "consumer welfare" based solely on consumer prices and the internal efficiency of corporations which has enabled them to amass unprecedented power.⁵⁴³ According to one critic, "Despite occasional setbacks dominant firms enjoy considerably more freedom to choose pricing, marketing and product development strategies as they wish, without incurring antitrust liability".⁵⁴⁴

Consequences

Hathaway (2020) argues in a more general sense that central aspects of neoliberal policy such as deregulation, non-intervention, free markets and free trade have augmented the power of corporations at the expense of that of citizens and consumers. For instance, environmental, health, and consumer protection laws that impose costs on corporations have been opposed by politicians who seek to 'free the wealth creators', while other regulations that support corporate profitability concerning, for example, bankruptcy law, data trading or corporate confidentiality are left alone or even expanded. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) of 1998 was the fruit of a successful music industry campaign that put an end to "peer to peer" sharing through sites such as Napster, enabling the launch of products such as the DVD and streaming services such as Youtube and Spotify, which are now accused of making outrageously low payouts to artists.⁵⁴⁵

Section 230 of the US Communication Decency Act, 1996 is a good example of the ability of the legislature ultimately to shape the corporate landscape. Sometimes referred to as the 'legal backbone of the internet' this enabled tech companies to grow at an unprecedented rate whilst protecting them from legal action. Together with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) of 1998, Section 230 rules that with some exceptions, Internet Service Providers hosting content from third parties are not liable for what third-parties post on their platforms. Originally designed to protect a nascent industry, the situation today is quite different as technology corporations are amongst the biggest and most powerful on the planet. A related issue has been the development of a business model that while "free" at the point of use is driven by selling 'data exhaust' to advertisers and maximising advertising revenue while by employing engagement-based rankings and

⁵⁴² Philippon, (2019).

⁵⁴³ Lynn, (2010).

⁵⁴⁴ Kovavic, (2020: 480).

⁵⁴⁵ For commentary on "notice and takedown" whereby hosting companies must take down material that violates intellectual property when notified – which in reality provides "near immunity" for violators. Another feature, the "anti-circumvention" language facilitated the launch of the DVD. While the Act had a chilling effect on "fair use of copyright material, it enabled Google to become one of the world's largest companies. See Kravets (2008) and Blistein (2021) for opposing views.

complex algorithms, where content is prioritized based on how users interact with it. Coupled with the spread of harmful and malicious content by third parties, this has become particularly worrisome, particularly with respect to its effect on children and young adults. At time of writing Section 230 protection was upheld with respect to Google and Twitter (X) by the US Supreme Court. While the parents of children driven to suicide by harmful content might think otherwise, the decision was praised by others for upholding the principle of free speech.⁵⁴⁶

Superabundant Choice

Milton Friedman became the public face of neoliberalism following the publication of *Free to Choose* (Friedman & Friedman, 1980), the year after the election of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and that in which Ronald Reagan was elected President of the USA. Friedman's book and accompanying television series popularised the neoliberal project in an accessible manner, elevating individual freedom and choice as the supreme values given the presumption that the consumer is rational and knows what she wants, so that she should be considered responsible as the one best placed to serve her own interests and left in peace to do so, so long she does no harm to others. Friedman argued that while selfishness cannot be got rid of, it can be curtailed through the full operation of the market mechanism. He explained that while a selfish seller may deceive a buyer once and get away with it, with active and lively competition between sellers, the duped party, having learnt their lesson, can and will go elsewhere next time. Freedom of choice has since become a mantra, defining what today seems to be perceived as a universal right. What was once reserved as a luxury for the few is now regarded as a natural expectation in virtually every sphere of life from the economy, to one's relationships and even one's personal identity, sexuality and even the choice to legally to determine the time of one's death.

Given diversity of tastes and preferences it was long assumed that it is better for consumers to have a variety of offerings to choose from. In their television programme the Friedmans illustrated this when on location in a Hong-Kong hot-food market, suggesting that with such a variety of cheap, nutritious food on offer, why would anyone need to cook! Given this assumption it came as something of a surprise when research found that in some situations increasing the diversity of choice can put consumers off while decreasing the assortment can increase the chance they might buy.⁵⁴⁷ One strand of research focused on alignment between offerings.⁵⁴⁸ In an aligned assortment it is relatively easy to judge between a number of alternatives because they differ on just one important attribute. For example, if one is concerned about the costs of running a motor car, knowing that one car will do 50 mpg while an alternative does 30 mpg will help considerably. Non-alignable differences, where an attribute is possessed by one alternative but not the other, are much more difficult to decide on; for instance where one

⁵⁴⁶ Bhuiyan, J. (2023). US supreme court reinforces immunity for Google and Twitter in win for tech behemoths. *The Guardian*, 19th May.

⁵⁴⁷ See, Dhar, (1997); Boatright & Nunes, (2001).

⁵⁴⁸ Gourville & Soman, (2005).

car has a sunroof and the other has no sunroof but a plush interior. These can lead to information overload and “overchoice”.⁵⁴⁹

Individual consumer choice is today unquestioned in areas of social life that in years gone by were governed by social convention, ranging from women’s right to work, to questions of health sexuality, and even the determination of the time and place of one’s death. Given how large these areas are it is impossible to do justice to the available research. For Elizabeth Salecl, ‘the tyranny of choice’ can be traumatic rather than resulting in happiness as those she describes are plagued by anxiety as to whether they *ought* to be given a choice in the first place, and when they do make a choice, whether this is in relation to choosing a partner, to have a child, or opt for a particular treatment regime, they have made the correct choice.⁵⁵⁰ With respect to healthcare studies of patients in different countries offer a mixed picture, with some indicating that they would rather leave the choice to the experts, particularly when it comes to serious conditions, whereas others seem to be relatively comfortable with being given a choice.⁵⁵¹

In the study by Clarke (2007), of the extent to which consumption of public services can be compared to shopping, one of the main differences he discovered was that in the context of social services such as health, social care, tax collection and police services, the user often has no choice but to use the service and does not see themselves as a customer; people need these services because they are usually in need of help of some kind. As an example, a staff member in social care said that by comparison to working in a large supermarket, “I don’t stand by a till giving them a wash-down”.⁵⁵² Users of health care did not like the appellation of “customer”, for example because this implied a “take it or leave it” relationship, like going into a shop and choosing and because the relationship with their doctor is different to that of a shop. Clarke (2007) and Bevir and Trentmann (2007, 8) are critical of those who in their view too readily apply Foucault’s arguments on governmentality to the context of social service consumption, by arguing the need to take into account the role of culture and of individual agency and beliefs in these different contexts. The following case illustrates some of the complexities involved.

“Sammy’s Choice”

Choice has also been extended to those whom the system judges as vulnerable. The following example drawn from the real-life experience of Jim who has been working for ten years as a community support officer, living in sheltered housing with a group of four individuals who have learning disabilities, one of whom is Sammy. He also monitors individuals who live in the community,

Every Monday I sit down with my clients and we work through a shopping list of what to order for the next week. Each client receives money from the State, notionally £300, from which about £100

⁵⁴⁹ Chernev, Bokenhol & Goodman (2015) offer a meta-analysis.

⁵⁵⁰ Salecl, (2011: 17).

⁵⁵¹ See as instances, Zolkefli, (2017); Gregório, Henriques, et al (2021).

⁵⁵² Clarke, (2007, 108).

goes into a communal kitty to support living expenses. Clients have it drummed into them that it is their choice as to what to order, but even those clients with relatively high mental ability have little understanding of the worth of things or what's in their best interest. One client – let's call him Sammy, insists that he just wants to eat biscuits or crisps and I've no right to disagree or intervene, "*because it's my choice*".... It's hardly a surprise is it that diabetes brought on by obesity is a problem for Sammy.

The allocation of funds to clients is a mystery to Jim, as some have too little while others have far too much. If the sum in a client's account reaches a ceiling, Jim is told to spend it. Again this is left to client choice. He ruminates that his clients have the feeling that they do have choice,

...but they have bugger all choice anyway, because otherwise they'd be institutionalised. This is all they have known. They couldn't survive without support from family and state. They get paid benefits but the brother might get them, or the parents will use the mobility car paid for by the state or use the money to decorate the house. Some will run their clients, even the high ability ones to the bank terminal the moment their money arrives. But the notion that, "*it's my choice, my right*", is drummed into them. Sammy gets all his money from PIPs and it builds in his account until he is ineligible for payments and we are told he has to spend the money. He didn't understand this but as carers we had to get his money down. He then decided it was his choice he was buying a telephone every week. Then he started buying electric toothbrushes, then TVs and then a sitting-up chair, then a big imitation jukebox. How it works is a mystery.

To what extent can Sammy's behaviour be described as rational? It is worthwhile revisiting Gary Becker's definition of rationality as consisting of logical coherence, whether or not a person's beliefs and preferences are reasonable. Becker cites as an example that an individual who prefers to be hated rather than loved might not be reasonable, but can be considered rational so long as their preferences are consistent with this. So, one conjectures that whenever possible this obnoxious individual will go out of their way consistently to provoke and annoy others in as many ways as possible. Kahneman considers Becker's definition of rationality as logical coherence "impossibly restrictive", because it presumes an omniscient consciousness of logical rules that is well beyond the capacity of the finite human mind (Kahneman, 2011: 411). He contends that while reasonable people cannot be considered rational by that definition, neither should they be thought of as irrational. Rather, while humans are not irrational, they are not well described by the rationality model and often need help to make good judgements. However, returning to Becker's example of the individual who prefers to be hated, does this really presume omniscience?

Although Sammy's preferences for biscuits and crisps have led to him being morbidly obese, given that these form a pattern over time, they can be argued to be logically coherent and so to approximate to the definition of rationality described by Gary Becker. While his other behaviours involving buying and then throwing away brand new phones and toothbrushes may be more difficult to account for, Becker might retort that his theory does not try to explain the behaviour of one individual but applies to the market as a whole.

More generally the idea that the parties to a transaction are informed assumes that they each have the requisite literacy and numerate skills required to become so. While to be knowledgeable does not require one to be literate and numerate, nevertheless, the

growing complexity of products, particularly financial services products, requires high levels of both, if one is to detect what is contained in the 'fine print' or to discern the meaning of precise technical terms such as 'AER' for example. A UK study conducted in 1999 found that one in five of all U.K. adults, seven million in all, were functionally illiterate - when given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, they could not locate the page reference for plumbers.⁵⁵³ This finding was broadly in line with those for Ireland and the USA although it was slightly higher than some other European countries.⁵⁵⁴ Problems with numeracy were more common than with literacy with almost half of all UK adults possessing skills below the level expected of an 11-year old, while a quarter could not perform the simplest calculations. The lack of the requisite skills of literacy and numeracy was borne out by the massive scandal involving the 'miss-selling' of pensions in the U.K. during the 1980's and 1990's, when millions of people were persuaded to abandon relatively secure and rewarding company schemes for personal pensions. While the research sparked a national campaign to improve literacy and numeracy, a follow-up report fifteen years later found that nothing had changed.⁵⁵⁵

While the above is concerning, Ozanne , Adkins & Sandlin (2005) who conducted a rare study into how US consumers with low levels of functional literacy negotiate the marketplace contend that simple measures of functional literacy are not very useful in understanding the realities of negotiating the marketplace, as agents develop a range of practices that they apply in specific social contexts. The authors identified four distinct groupings of which those then named Alienated Consumers, accepted the stigma of low literacy, saying that they felt ashamed and stressed in their dealings in the marketplace, which included instances of being exploited and cheated by sales staff. At the other end of the spectrum 'Savvy Consumers' were unashamed of their low literary skills, being socially skilled and forceful. Although poor in book reading, they were able to get by through memorising labels and highway signs.

Research conducted in the wake of the 2008 'Credit Crunch' has been less sanguine, confirming that consumers lacking in basic numeric skills were the most vulnerable. Gerardi, Lorenz & Meier (2010) hypothesised that US 'sub-prime' mortgage borrowers who defaulted on their loans would possess lower numerical skills than those who did not. They investigated this by surveying sub-prime mortgage borrowers from three States. Their findings indicated that borrowers with the lowest numerical ability were delinquent 24% of the time compared to 12% of those with the highest numerical ability. Borrowers with the lowest numerical ability had a 21% chance of foreclosure compared

⁵⁵³ From Chapter 1 of Improving Literacy and Numeracy, A Fresh Start Sir Claus Moser <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/rep01.htm>

⁵⁵⁴ The percentage of adults with literacy skills at the lowest level is estimated to be: Poland , 44%, Ireland 24%, Britain 23%, USA 22%, Switzerland, 19%, Belgium, France, New Zealand, Canada 17%, Germany 12%, Netherlands 10%, Sweden 7%.

⁵⁵⁵ *Skills for Life Survey*, (2011) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2011-skills-for-life-survey>, the *Adult Participation in Learning Survey* (December 2019) found that there had been a 10% drop (almost 4 million people) in adults who participate in further learning. <https://www.skillsforlifenetw.com/news/adult-participation-learning-survey-2019/>

to about 7% for the highest ability group. What questions did Gerardi et al. (2010) ask? The easiest question asked is shown below.⁵⁵⁶

Q1. In a sale, a shop is selling all items at half price. Before the sale, a sofa costs \$300. How much will it cost in the sale?

Q2. If the chance of getting a disease is 10%, how many people out of 1,000 would be expected to get the disease?

Q3. A second hand car dealer is selling a car for \$6,000. This is two-thirds of what it cost new. How much did the car cost new?

Q4. If 5 people all have the winning numbers in the lottery and the prize is \$2 million, how much will each of them get.

Q5. Let's say you have \$200 in a savings account. The account earns ten percent interest per year. How much will you have in the account at the end of two years?

The above provides a mere flavour of a continuing debate about rational choice theory in economics, psychology, philosophy and consumer research.⁵⁵⁷ However global institutions such as the UN are now much more circumspect on the topic of rationality. For instance, the authors of the Human Development Report (2022) state that;

“(b)ecause of the large influence of economists, much of the formal analysis remains confined to individually rational behaviour. We try to explain all forms of cooperation by reference to self-interest. This often leads to exciting mathematical models, but one consequence of this obsession is we forget that universal self-interested behaviour is one of those assumptions in the woodwork, which we take for granted but is not true.”⁵⁵⁸

Or to put it another way, economists who stick to linear models because they are more tractable are compared to drunks who look for their car keys under the street-lamp because the light is better there.⁵⁵⁹

Robert Dahl made his position clear in a late interview when he mentioned that while rational choice theory can play a part in theorising the subject, “to see that as a dominant way of thinking would be a terrible blunder”, as to do so ignores the richness and diversity of human experience.⁵⁶⁰ In Norman's view, from Malthus, to Ricardo, Jevons and Walras to Arrow, the study of how markets work became progressively more abstract

⁵⁵⁶ Gerardi, Goette & Meier (2010), pp. 11-12. A person was assigned to the lowest ability group if they answered questions 1,2 & 3 incorrectly or answered question 1 correctly but got questions 2,3 & 4 wrong (16% of all respondents). The second group was comprised of those who answered at least one of the first four questions incorrectly (54% of all respondents). The third group was comprised of those who answered question 5 incorrectly (17%). Finally all of those who answered all five questions correctly were placed in a fourth group (13%).

⁵⁵⁷ See for example Elster (2014); Jacoby, (2000).

⁵⁵⁸ United Nations. (2022). *Human Development Report*.

⁵⁵⁹ Peter Coy (2000), *Is the Dismal Science Dazed and Confused?*, Buiness Week Jan. 24., reviewing Paul Ormerod, *Butterfly Economics: A New General Theory of Social and Economic Behavior* (1998), from Jacoby, (2000: 157).

⁵⁶⁰ See Dahl, R.A. & M. Levi, (2009), A conversation with Robert Dahl. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 1-9, quote from page 8.

and formalistic, concerning itself with abstraction and the discovery of immutable laws. In so doing Smith's "cautious, empirical and qualified 'system of natural liberty' becomes transformed into a system of perfectly free commerce."⁵⁶¹

William Davies detects a curious twist in the landscape of choice, such that what ought to be an active process is turned into passivity and reaction.⁵⁶² The social media landscape is populated by trolls who go out of their way to trigger a reaction; and the carefully curated images circulated on WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok, likewise feed off reactions. There are also those endless emails requesting feedback that follow in the wake of a purchase, often involving the supplication of an employee for whom a perfect score is the only one that counts. As Davies notes, whether one is an Instagrammer on holiday, constantly vigilant for opportunities to choreograph an event who constantly monitors follower reactions, or the delivery company that surveils its drivers, the feedback loop demands constant vigilance and work and fuels anxiety from the nagging possibility that this will be negative, or worse, that there will be no response at all. Davies wonders whether the anxiety provoked by today's reaction economy allows us to be steered in directions we did not consent to, where we are "drawn towards controversy".⁵⁶³ As he sees it the reaction economy resonates with reactionary political rhetoric, which, far from offering choice elevates certain individuals "who have the strength to remain autonomous in an age of obedience and conformity" and a large body of followers.⁵⁶⁴

Rank and Yank

Meritocracy is valued by neoliberals by rewarding individual talent rather than group patronage. Harking back to Spencer's formulation of social Darwinism, grotesque differences between the "compensation" paid to CEOs compared to the "pay" of their "fellow employees" are characterised as "just rewards for talent". This view presumes that humans are fundamentally competitive and that life is a zero-sum game such that if granted equality of opportunity, the most talented and industrious individuals will "naturally" rise to the top. Mentioned in the last chapter, was a more hard-edged view of meritocracy that is based on dubious research that claims that some "races" are more deserving than others. This idea of 'natural' differences is Spencerist by recycling long discredited assumptions of the superiority of men over women and of white men, to men of other "races". Modern genetics has since exploded the entire basis of "race theory". The racism inherent in some neoliberal and Neo-libertarian arguments is not so hidden through arguments that some "cultures" are better fitted to living in market societies than are others. For the employee working on a zero-hours contract under continuous '365' observation life is fraught with anxiety at the prospect that today's success may turn into tomorrow's failure and the dreaded scrapheap the day after.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶¹ Norman, (2019, 180).

⁵⁶² Davies, William, (2023). The reaction economy. *London Review of Books*, 2nd March: p. 3,5,6,7,8.

⁵⁶³ Davies, (2023, 5).

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁶⁵ Verhaeghe, (2012).

Equality

While the issues raised above in relation to social reproduction are linked to equality this is of little concern to neoliberals of all stripes from Thatcherites to anarcho-liberals. As an instance, Braithwaite quotes Alfred Sherman, one of Thatcher's closest advisers, 'who wrote in 1977 that inequality created 'prizes for the aspiring' and delivered 'efficiency and justice'.⁵⁶⁶ While neoliberals espouse a radical conception of freedom, berating those who do not conform to their narrow conception of this, Robert Dahl was by no means the only theorist to raise concerns about the growing threat to democracy posed by rising social inequality. Similar misgivings were voiced over the years by the prominent management theorist Paul Drucker (1939) and the economists J.K. Galbraith (1967) and Thomas Piketty (2014; 2021). On the other hand for neoliberals for whom equality is repugnant, social inequality is natural and indeed necessary, as the motivating force that drives forward progress. In their view the rich are wealth creators whose wealth is the product of their own hard work, who thus should be allowed to increase it, as to do so will benefit society as a whole.

Drucker (1939) had argued that the principles behind *homo economicus* threatens the social equality that is essential for democracy as it fails to diffuse ownership throughout society. The Thatcher government in the UK sought to provide some semblance of equality in the 1980s through the attempt to create a 'shareholding democracy' through privatising nationalised utilities. This failed with long-term disastrous results.⁵⁶⁷ In Britain just two million individuals took up the offer to buy British Telecom shares at knock down rates following privatisation, which although large, given around thirty million were in work at the time, constituted a small proportion of the overall number of those eligible.⁵⁶⁸

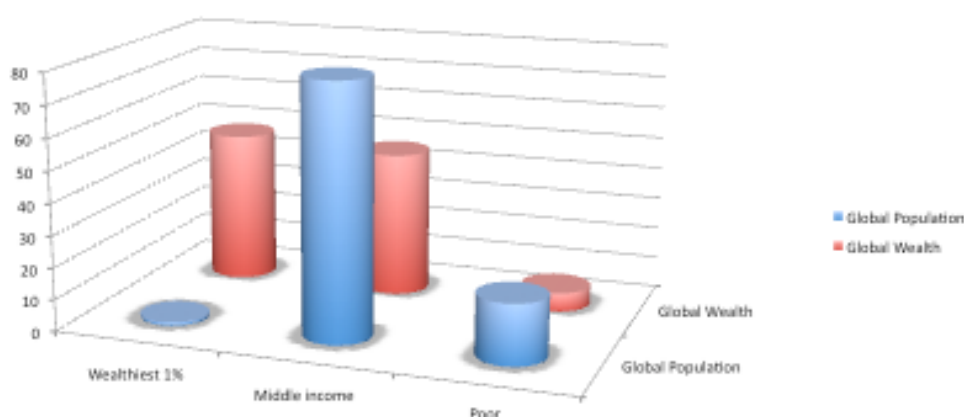
While the data informing the Figure below is rather dated, it provides an indication of the huge global imbalance between rich and poor.

⁵⁶⁶ Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, op. cit., 30.

⁵⁶⁷ Rather than beginning to trade in shares the individuals who bought them sold them when they rose in value (they were sold at a discount) or simply held onto them for fear of knowing what to do with them. Those of the two million private investors who bought *British Telecom* shares on 30th November, 1984, were reported to have done well, so long as they remembered they had them (Insley, J. (2004). When public went private: Twenty years on. *The Guardian*, 28th November). A subsequent BBC report into *British Gas* holdings stated; "Many have shied away from selling largely due to ignorance and fear of brokerage fees eating into profits from the sale. Others may have inherited the shares and simply forgot they had them" (BBC, (2011) *British Gas shares: Thousands 'told Sid' 25 years ago*, 21st November). Shares from the privatized water industry were eventually bought by hedge funds or banks that for years paid shareholders millions in dividends while allowing the system to fall into disrepair, allowing raw sewage to flow into lakes, rivers and the sea (see numerous articles in *Private Eye*).

⁵⁶⁸ According to the Labour Force Survey 1984, 26.5 million were in work, 4.6 million were self-employed and 25% economically inactive.

Figure 2.10: Global Distribution of Wealth



Source: Based on data from UN Development Report, 2015

Despite progress referred to above, the simple, stark picture is that the rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer. In 2023 the UN produced a much more sober report, that due to the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the number of those living in extreme poverty had risen for the first time in thirty years, such that if the trend persists by 2030, 575 million people will remain trapped in extreme poverty.⁵⁶⁹ One of the ways in which OXFAM, which produces annual reports on equality, seeks to hammer home this key message is to quote the number of super-rich individuals who own the same proportion of wealth as the bottom 50% of the world population. The number varies from year to year; in 2016 it was 62, while in 2022, just 81 billionaires owned the same proportion of wealth as four billion of their fellow human beings.⁵⁷⁰

Thomas Piketty (2014) offers two broad reasons for the increase in disparity between the rich and the rest, giving the lie to neoliberal assumptions that increased capital and lower taxes on wealth and reduced regulations will increase growth and provide higher wages. Based on an analysis of his home country France over two hundred years, he found that sustained periods of economic growth occurred only in those periods following the massive destruction of capital that occurred during the First and Second World Wars. Since then, growth has been sluggish and the return on capital, or wealth, which is in the hands of a few, has grown faster than the economy. He notes that a different dynamic is at play in the USA, citing data to argue that super-managers comprise 60% of the 0.1%

⁵⁶⁹ United Nations, (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals, 2023: Special Edition*. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

⁵⁷⁰ OXFAM (2023: 16, Methodology note 1.8).

of the population at the top of the income distribution. More recently, a longitudinal report by the Economic Policy Institute found that in the USA, CEO earnings adjusted for inflation, rose by 1,460% in the period from 1978 to 2021, 37% more than stock market growth during the same period. Most startling was that their average earning increased by 30.3% during the pandemic. The startling consequences of this huge rise is that CEO-to-worker compensation which stood at 20-1 in 2000, rose to 372-1 prior to the pandemic and is now 399-1.⁵⁷¹

The picture for those on average or low earnings has been quite different. Falling returns from wages compared to those from capital led a number of relatively poor individuals to take on enormous mortgages on low interest rates in order to gain a foothold in the property market. The result was the “sub-prime” that sparked the credit crunch (Stiglitz, 2010; Koechlin, 2013). As compared with the vast increase in earnings for CEOs, the median US family income scarcely changed between 1977 and 2007 while that of the poorest 20% declined (Koechlin, 2013: 19). The fall in earnings in western countries was partly due to the fall in unionization of labour and a concomitant increase in the casualization of work, or the ‘gig’ economy, as it is more widely known. In some developing countries the precarity associated with informal labour has been a fact of life for some time. According to the ILO (2018) more than two billion people work in the informal economy, ranging from 85% in Africa to just over 25% in Europe and Central Asia. The authors note that as the level of education increases, that of working in the informal economy decreases.

In Europe, social disquiet about the effects of neoliberal policies has since given rise to two populist movements from Right and Left which are shadows of their fascist and communist predecessors. The Left has been primarily motivated to campaign against inequality through the formation of movements such as Five Star, Podemos, Syriza, and the Labour Party under Corbyn, whereas the Right, which had been slowly building its base from the 1970s onwards, has successfully leveraged increasing xenophobia and racism in every European country in relation to immigration.⁵⁷² By comparison, in the USA, which Perry Anderson aptly describes as an immigrant society “as no European society has ever been ...of “selective welcome and solidarity for newcomers,”⁵⁷³ the Right has resorted to a tactic of labelling the Mexican government and more recently even a previous ally, Canada, as drug-dealers and criminals.⁵⁷⁴

Paul Verhaeghe argues that today anxiety and depressive disorders in adults and ADHD and autism in the young have replaced the hysterical neuroses characteristic of the rigid conformism of the Victorian era. His claim seems to be borne out by the evidence. Increasing prescriptions of antidepressants such as Selective Serotonin Reuptake

⁵⁷¹ Bivens & Kandra, (2022).

⁵⁷² See Anderson, P. (2025). Regime change in the West? *London Review of Books*, pp. 3-8.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷⁴ The White House, (2025). *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Proceeds with Tariffs on Imports from Canada and Mexico*. 3rd March. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/03/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-proceeds-with-tariffs-on-imports-from-canada-and-mexico/>The White House

Inhibitors (SSRIs). According to one source published prior to Covid, large-scale surveys conducted in European countries indicated that almost 34% of individuals experience an anxiety disorder at some point. The incidence of anxiety disorders is since thought to have risen by a further 25%. A UK study of trends found that from 1998 to 2018 there was an almost eightfold (787%) increase in the diagnosis of autism from 1998 to 2018. A US study found a more modest increase for diagnosis ADHD, from 6% to just over 10% in the 20-year period from 1997 to 2016 (Xu et al., 2018). Verhaeghe links the growth in anxiety disorders to the neoliberal vision of a self that is perpetually on show and exposed to the harsh light of social judgement through audits,

What about inequality in the world? The Washington Consensus extended and deepened this relation to developing countries which had to abide by the “ten commandments” of free market doctrine and their accompanying “disciplines” if they were to receive international support. The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 extended from GATT to cover trade in services, and in intellectual property. As applied by the IMF and World Bank, countries were now instructed to “set their house in order” by initialising a regime of fiscal discipline with low deficits, redirecting economic policies from providing subsidies to growth, infrastructure development, education and healthcare, and allowing the market to determine interest-rates. Other stipulations concerned recognition of private property rights together with related policies of de-regulation and privatization. Two of the most important, comprising numbers six and seven respectively enabled foreign investors to control any sector of the domestic economy and to eliminate trade barriers.

World Bank and IMF reports equated free competition and free exchange with economic welfare and democracy coupled to, “a myth of virtually unlimited social progress” (Gill 1995). Privileges accorded to the powerful have been reinforced in OECD nations to the vast detriment of the majority of the population. Referring to Galbraith’s technostructure, Gill describes today’s elite as a self-perpetuating and self-serving group that lives in enclaves remote from the everyday lives of the majority of citizens (Gill, 1995: 407). While it is commonplace to contrast the secure well-paid jobs of knowledge workers to their precarious colleagues who are treated as service drones, there are commonalities. The US Justice Department complained in 2010 that senior executives at Apple, Google, Intel, Pixar, and two other corporations had “formed and actively managed” an agreement that “deprived” the engineers and scientists who work for them of “access to better job opportunities.” One employee, from Apple called Steve says, “They treat us like dirt”, then unleashing a string of curses. “Market capitalism should be a two-way street, no? If they get to make us compete against one another, then they too should have to compete”.⁵⁷⁵

The overall conclusion of Piketty’s (2021), argument is that in the absence of another round of mass destruction of capital, the economic scene will be characterised by slow growth, declining incomes for the majority and widening inequality. He dismisses narratives around “trickle down”, to argue that “(h)istorically, it is the battle for equality and education that has made economic development possible, and not the veneration of

⁵⁷⁵ Lynn, (2021).

property, stability and inequality” (Piketty, 2021: 139). The reduction in inequality stalled from the time of the election of neoliberal governments in 1980 and has since gone into reverse, with the introduction of regressive taxes that favour the rich. He calls the period from 1914 to 1980 “the great redistribution”, when the fiscal and social state was tripled or quadrupled in all Western countries, providing a large contribution to economic development, particularly through financing expenditure on education and health (Ibid.:122). Education was vital as the second industrial revolution between 1880 and 1940 required a numerate and literate workforce (ibid.: 123).

Social Reproduction

Statistics are a necessary evil; necessary in that the sense that they support or refute our hunches and enable us to consider trends and make comparisons; evil, in the sense that they quickly make our eyes glaze over. So the following aims to provide no more than a snapshot of important issues. If one takes “neoliberal” in its broadest sense to refer to the widest possible extension of choice, then this can encompass choice by an adult, to save to buy a property of their own, to eat, drink or smoke what they want, to marry, divorce, have an abortion, or die at the time of their choosing. While the visible and invisible forces involved may be complex, all of these choices have had a societal effect.

Taking the composition of families in the (dis)United Kingdom as an example, in 2023 lone parents accounted for 16% of families with 66% either married or living in civil partnerships.⁵⁷⁶ Given that 13% of the population living alone comprise 30% of all households, a Vogon might observe that the UK does not have a housing problem but rather a people crisis, where the obvious solution is to allocate more people to the available properties. Life is of course not quite so simple, although young men seem to be pulling their weight, as one-third aged between 20 and 34 are reported to be living at home with their parents. Only half of those described as ‘families’ had one or more children, and of those that did, just less than half had one child. Between 2012 and 2022 the number of annual abortions rose from 185,000 to 250,000 mainly from those in their early twenties, with a drop in those under eighteen but a steady rise in those aged over thirty-five.⁵⁷⁷ In 2023, the Total Fertility Rate in England and Wales had dropped to 1.44 children per woman, the lowest on record, with potentially drastic implications for population replacement.⁵⁷⁸

A notable feature of life for many has been the decline in real wages, which like a comet has a long tail that stretches back over decades. Taking the United States as an example, there from 1979, there was a growing gap between real wages and

⁵⁷⁶ Office for National Statistics, (2024). *Families and households in the UK: 2023*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2023>

⁵⁷⁷ Davies, C. (2024). Number of abortions in England and Wales hits record levels. *The Guardian*, 24th May.

⁵⁷⁸ Office for National Statistics, (2024). *How is the fertility rate changing in England and Wales?* 28th October. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/articles/howisthefertilityratechanginginenglandandwales/2024-10-28>

productivity.⁵⁷⁹ When the financial crisis of 2007-2008 hit, the banks were quickly bailed out and to the chagrin of many, few were imprisoned⁵⁸⁰. Real wages were also largely stagnant in the UK, the same in 2022 as they had been in 2005.⁵⁸¹ While the US government response to the financial crisis was to stimulate the economy, in the UK, the incoming conservative government implemented a harsh austerity programme, involving cuts to welfare, including the reassessment of those on disability benefits which greatly increased anxiety levels for those affected. Meanwhile, under the influence of German ordoliberalism⁵⁸², the European Central Bank subjected governments of the 'PIGS' that had been thrown into crisis by the crash, to an unremitting regime of harsh financial discipline.⁵⁸³

Poverty: From the preceding discussion of equality it is clear that overtly has a major effect on an individual's life chances and indeed on their life expectancy. Poverty disproportionately affects the young. In the USA poverty amongst those aged eighteen or less was 16%, or almost 4% higher than the overall rate.⁵⁸⁴ In the UK which has a slightly different measure of poverty well over 45% of children living in families with three or more children were in poverty.⁵⁸⁵

Precarity of employment can harm those directly involved and also their dependents as it is insecure and not unionised and poorly regulated. One longitudinal study of trends in the USA between 1988 and 2016 found that this disproportionately affects women and racialised minorities, while noting recent increases in precarity for men and higher income groups, which they explained as the result of declining union membership.⁵⁸⁶

Obesity: Obesity caused in large part by a sick food industry can present problems for physical and psychological health and is a rising problem in the USA and UK. According to one estimate obesity in adults in the USA accounted for 40% of the

⁵⁷⁹ Mishel, L.; E. Gould & J. Bivens (2015). *Wage stagnation in nine charts*. Economic Policy Institute. See especially Figure 1, according to which the average middle-class household had \$17,867 less in 1987 than in 1979.

⁵⁸⁰ Just one person was convicted in the United States – a point I will return to in the next chapter.

⁵⁸¹ Tinline, P. (2023). Why has it taken so long for stagnant pay to become central to UK politics? *Economics Observatory*, 11th October. In the USA there was a rise in real wages in 2020. Source, FRED, (2025). Employed full time: Median usual weekly real earnings: Wage and salary workers: 16 years and over (LES1252881600Q. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 16th April 2025.

⁵⁸² Josef Hien, The rise and fall of ordoliberalism, *Socio-Economic Review*, Volume 22, Issue 4, October 2024, Pages 1947–1966, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwad018>

⁵⁸³ The pejorative term that bundled together Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain.

⁵⁸⁴ Benson, C. (2023). US poverty rate varies by age groups: Child poverty still higher than for older populations but still declining. *United States Census Bureau*, 4th December.

⁵⁸⁵ Brown, T. (2024). Child poverty: statistics, causes and the UK's policy response. *House of Lords Library*, 23rd April.

⁵⁸⁶ Oddo V.M.; C.C. Zhuang, S.B. Andrea, J. Eisenberg-Guyot, T. Peckham, D. Jacoby & A. Hajat (2021).. Changes in precarious employment in the United States: A longitudinal analysis. *Scand J Work Environ Health*. 2021 Apr 1;47(3):171-180. doi: 10.5271/sjweh.3939. Epub 2020 Dec 7. PMID: 33283874; PMCID: PMC8126438.

population, with severe obesity hovering at just below 10% of the population. However the authors also reported that the incidence of obesity had remained relatively steady since 2014.⁵⁸⁷ Obesity is more prevalent in older adults, some racial minorities and members of lower socio-economic groups, while women have a propensity to suffer from severe obesity. Authors have expressed most concern about what they describe as an epidemic of obesity amongst the young, with one study citing the doubling of obesity in young children and tripling amongst teenagers between 2010 and 2019⁵⁸⁸, with another study finding an eightfold-increase in those aged 5-19 in developed countries between 1975 and 2016.⁵⁸⁹

Noise: Noise today is not just a nuisance but can have profound affects on mental wellbeing by causing annoyance and sleep disturbance and can to physical effects such as heart disease which is life-shortening.⁵⁹⁰ The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that at least 1.6 million healthy life years are lost every year in western European countries alone due to the environmental noise⁵⁹¹ and another report by the European Environmental Agency found more than 100 million people in Europe were exposed to harmful levels of environmental noise pollution.⁵⁹²

Psychological Issues: Anxiety is the watchword of the times, given that today's individual is churned up by thinking about global concerns such as the experience of global heating and its public denial, rapid global realignment, jingoistic language, reports of not-so-distant wars, the prospect of coming war, and an economy on the slide amid oft-repeated tales of a country swamped by immigrants, coupled with the daily challenges presented by accelerated time pressure, precarious employment, constant evaluation, over-choice and invidious comparison. Below I touch briefly on another topic that is a source of anxiety, which is the paradox involving the perception of a rapid increase in crime when overall crime has never been lower.

Newspaper reports mention surveys where members of the public express opinions such as, "our cities are descending into hellholes" due to increasing crime.⁵⁹³ This was questioned in an article on "the great crime paradox", which noted that while crime rates,

⁵⁸⁷ U.S. Center for Disease Control. (2024). *Obesity and Severe Obesity Prevalence in Adults: United States*, August 2021–August 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db508.htm>

⁵⁸⁸ Sanyaolu A.; C. Okorie, X. Qi, J. Locke & S. Rehman, (2019). Childhood and Adolescent Obesity in the United States: A Public Health Concern. *Glob Pediatr Health*,1(6):2333794X19891305. doi: 10.1177/2333794X19891305. PMID: 31832491; PMCID: PMC6887808.

⁵⁸⁹ Di Cesare M; M. Sorić, P. Bovet, J.J. Miranda, Z. Bhutta, G.A. Stevens, A. Laxmaiah, A.P. Kengne & J.Bentham (2019).The epidemiological burden of obesity in childhood: a worldwide epidemic requiring urgent action. *BMC Med*.17(1), 212.

⁵⁹⁰ Hahad et al., (2020).

⁵⁹¹ Kempen et al., (2018)

⁵⁹²Ladjánszki, M. (2020). Health risks caused by environmental noise in Europe, *European Environmental Agency*, 14th December.

⁵⁹³ Murdoch, J.B., (2025). The great crime paradox, 31st July.. McWilliams, D. (2025), Crime is falling, so why do we believe it is surging? Last Word. *The Irish Times*, 9th August, 24.

particularly those involving violence have never been lower, in the USA, the UK or in Ireland, a growing number of people believe that crime is rising. A putative answer to this question might be that as the population ages so individuals feel more vulnerable about their security and may tend to magnify the risks. A more likely explanation to my mind is linked to Gary Becker's arguments in relation to crime. This views crime amorally as a cost-benefit calculation which holds that the aim of the police should be to raise the costs of crime above the potential benefit gained by the criminal. This has led to a focus of police resource away from certain categories of crime considered either as too expensive to be worthwhile, such as prosecuting corporate fraud, or as relatively trivial, involving crimes such as shoplifting, petty theft, personal fraud and anti-social behaviour. However as McWilliams argues, many of these are "in your face" crimes can have a profound psychological effect on the victim whose house has been burgled, witnessed a fist-fight or been the victim of anti-social behaviour⁵⁹⁴. The perceptions of an increase in crime is accentuated when crimes such as shoplifting actually do increase⁵⁹⁵ – and currently in the UK, this is at a ten-year high – and also when video clips of an assault are widely shared on social media.

A spotlight into Becker's psychology was shone in a speech at an award ceremony when he stated that *"In the early stages of my work on crime, I was puzzled by why theft is socially harmful since it appears merely to redistribute resources, usually from wealthier to poorer individuals"*⁵⁹⁶ This statement might be thought jaw-dropping in its cold-blooded rationality and his concomitant failure to recognize the psychological importance of goods as key to a person's sense of self-identity and security, which have been extensively writing about by consumer researchers.⁵⁹⁷

Governance Inc.

The chaos and fragmentation induced in the international governance arena by the policies of Trump-47 was foreshadowed in 2017, when the United States refused to appoint judges to the arbitration panel of the WTO, blocking the enforcement of trade rules.⁵⁹⁸ In response to this almost sixty countries created the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement to resolve disputes amongst themselves. Just fifty-one nations ratified the Oceans Treaty to establish protected areas in international waters. Then in 2025 the attempts by the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to cement an agreement on plastic pollution involving 183 nations foundered, principally over a dispute

⁵⁹⁴ McWilliams, D. (2025). Ireland's massive problem with "in your face" crimes is stoking fear. *The Irish Times*, 9th August.

⁵⁹⁵ Onita, L. (2025). Shoplifting at highest levels since records began. *Financial Times*, 25th July.

⁵⁹⁶ Becker was awarded a prize by the Swedish National Bank in 1992. The excerpt from the speech is from Black, W.K. (2014). Becker's imperialistic blunders about crime. *New Economic Perspectives*, 19th June. <https://neweconomicperspectives.org/2014/06/gary-beckers-imperialistic-blunders-crime.html>

⁵⁹⁷ See for instance articles on the extended self, beginning with Belk (1988).

⁵⁹⁸ Shafik, M. (2025). How to live in a G minus one world. *Financial Times*, 27th July, 11.

between oil producers and others over whether to tackle production or pollution.⁵⁹⁹ There were clear signs that the much-vaunted emergence a “multi-polar” world was now taking shape.

As cracks appear in the global order, In *Crack-Up Capitalism* Quinn Slobodian (2023) describes how countries today are not uniform spaces within which all have the right to travel freely subject to the law of the land, but are riddled with anomalous jurisdictions, enclaves, gated communities and zones such as EPZs, innovation hubs, tax havens and even city-states, where the rules governing freedom of movement, labour rights, earnings and taxation no longer apply. He contends that these spaces have proliferated for two reasons; from the drive of capital to extract more profit by paying lower wages and reduced taxes, and that by billionaire holders of legitimate and illegitimate wealth, for whom the concept of liberty translates into the freedom to move their wealth wherever and whenever they want, no questions asked, untrammelled by state taxes or by other interference. Their aspirations are met in the social structure imprinted into the design of places as diverse as Singapore, Liechtenstein, the Jebel Ali Free Zone in Dubai, the London Shard, New Songdo City in South Korea which collectively impose a social order that is more characteristic of the medieval period than the cosmopolitan metropolis envisaged in the modernist imagination.

From Corruption to Globalised Kleptocracy

As neoliberalism mutates into a new form that is gathering definition, it seems clear from research by the International Confederation of Independent Journalists (ICIJ) and authors such as Anne Applebaum and Quinn Slobodian, that a large part of that order will be corrupt. Liberal critics of neoliberalism have argued that the vast assemblage of monopoly power is one strand, albeit important, of a much wider web of corruption that has infected the polity and which compromises the democratic functioning of the state. They warn against the perceived inequities resulting from the neoliberal system of governance, including the growing gap between rich and poor, the increasing precarity of work for the ordinary citizen and the relative impunity of the rich.⁶⁰⁰ These critics link growing economic concentration to lax regulation and lack of reform which enables elites and MNCs to act with impunity to corrupt the system by rigging the market and rigging the rules. A growing number of legal scholars describe the Chicago School as “ideological extremists, cult-like fanatics, or carriers of a disease”, who have exerted a pernicious effect on competition policy, leaving in its wake a “vast wreckage”⁶⁰¹, featuring high and growing economic concentration and democratic institutions threatened by corporate leviathans.

A key difference between Thomas Piketty and many liberals is that liberals value negative freedom of the individual above all else, while he links social progress and prosperity to

⁵⁹⁹ Stallard E. & M. Poynting, (2025). Global plastics talks collapse as countries remain deeply divided. *BBC News: Climate and Science*, 15th August.

⁶⁰⁰ See for instance, Kovavic, (2020), Baker (2019); Tepper & Hearn (2019); Philippon, (2019); Lynn, (2010; 2019); Wu, (2018); Shaxon, (2011, 2019).

⁶⁰¹ This and the preceding quotation are from Kovavic, (2020): 461-462.

equality. Piketty, like Robert Dahl, regards equality as the central principle that underpins democratic consent and views inequality as a social, historical and political construction.⁶⁰² In a similar vein to Dahl, Piketty argues that wealth and prosperity are not created by individuals but emanate from a collective process and so there is a need to institute participatory democracy in business, a change that requires massive public support if it is to be realised.⁶⁰³ He thus questions the current state of affairs which accords power to stockholders who are accorded, “a quasi-sacred right to enrich themselves... and then, with the click of a mouse, to move their assets to a new jurisdiction”.⁶⁰⁴

In a theme that will be taken up again towards the end of chapter six, Piketty also questions why stockholders in joint-stock companies should legally have all the power, when employees, for whom employment constitutes a major part of their lives might be regarded as the “first long-term investors”.⁶⁰⁵ As he sees it there are other ways of organizing a property or a fiscal system and in this regard his prescription for change is more radical and thoroughgoing than that proposed by Dahl (1993), aiming towards a systemic transformation of capitalism. His plan involves the institution of a democratic, self-managing socialism that will involve the wholesale de-commercialization of the economy, the redistribution of inherited wealth and the re-introduction of a progressive tax regime. While some might argue that this is fanciful, Piketty points out the very real danger that unless something is done to address inequality by means of a tax on inherited wealth, capital will concentrate to levels incompatible with democracy, let alone social justice. He is also concerned that there is no protection for democracy or equality in states that are close to being captured by big money, which controls ownership of the media and political think-tanks.⁶⁰⁶ Moreover, while some argue that since Great Financial Crash of 2008 the Washington Consensus no longer exists, in the absence of an alternative, this continues to exert its malign influence.⁶⁰⁷ With others, he points out the massive damage done to the global South by the free circulation of capital and the proliferation of tax havens which undermines the very basis of democracy, and which stokes massive public anger.

Piketty (2013), ascribes a portion of the blame for the current dire state of inequality to marginal rates of tax for top income earners and corporations which have fallen sharply since the mid 1970s across much of the world. Despite these low rates many of the wealthiest corporations and individuals seek to avoid tax entirely. At time of writing Elon Musk paid a real tax rate of 3.2%, while half of the world’s billionaires live in countries

⁶⁰² Piketty, (2022): 9.

⁶⁰³ Piketty, (2022): 117).

⁶⁰⁴ Piketty, (2022): 171.

⁶⁰⁵ Piketty, (2022): 113.

⁶⁰⁶ Piketty, (2022): 110.

⁶⁰⁷ Piketty, (2022): 208-211.

with no inheritance tax.⁶⁰⁸ In contrast, Shaxson (2019) locates the core of the problem not on the market but rather the accumulation of capital, which in a similar vein to Karl Marx, he argues is parasitic on society. Whether constituted as a Multinational Corporation (MNC) or a private individual, capital tries its best to evade the rules that ordinary citizens are bound to live by in a democratic system. A complex international parasitic apparatus of specialists has developed to enable the sequestration of funds from tax, consisting of a panoply of “corporate service providers”, from accountants to financial advisers, lawyers and property agents shield the beneficial owners of property and other assets from scrutiny by channelling funds through a thicket of shell companies fronted by sham directors. The system is lubricated by a lucrative “revolving door” whereby government officials and regulators on relatively low salaries transfer their loyalty to the other side advising those who hold dirty money as how to avoid loopholes. The system of lax regulation is enabled and perpetuated through donations to political parties.

Capitalists, whether MNCs or individuals, evade the rules that bind everyone else by diverting funds, amounting to many trillions of dollars, through so-called tax-havens. The use of tax havens to dodge tax increases inequality; the rich become richer and monopolies become stronger, thus corrupting markets. For Shaxson (ibid.) tax havens provide the link between monopolization and financialization. Although the tax haven conjures an exotic image of the Bahamas Bermuda, or Jersey, the biggest corporate tax havens are in Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Ireland, Singapore and Hong Kong. Every MNC has subsidiaries in tax havens; many have hundreds, added to which complexity an MNC might route its structure through several tax havens. The tax-avoidance system is enabled by a number of devices such as loopholes in tax policy, competition between tax havens for their lucrative clients and a global system of secrecy; For instance, the British Virgin Islands specializes in offshore trusts that ensure secrecy.

Although British politicians have preached the importance of transparency and fairness to those in the third world, they forgot to mention that the UK provides a safe haven for some of the most corrupt companies and individuals on the planet. The City of London is the base for a network of high-paid fixers, tax advisers and lawyers that lubricates the machinery of the dirty money laundry which is channelled through Limited Liability Partnerships (LLPs) that act as “brass plates” for shell companies established in tax havens such as the British Virgin Islands.⁶⁰⁹ The hybrid LLP has limited liability and is not a taxable entity in the UK. For example, an Italian fraudster Gianfranco Lande established Vector Aerospace Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) at a prestigious Mayfair address in London, as a vehicle to siphon over €80 million from the €1.5 billion order made by the Austrian government from EADS, the manufacturer of the Eurofighter. The money was funnelled offshore through the Royal Bank of Scotland in the Isle of Man to companies controlled by Lande and others, although its final destination could not be identified. Not only were the payments made by Vector impossible to trace, so was the firm’s ownership,

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.: 17.

⁶⁰⁹ This section was mainly influenced by the following article, Brooks, R. & A. Bousfield (undated). Where there’s muck, there’s brass plates. *Private Eye*, 6pp. https://www.private-eye.co.uk/pictures/special_reports/where-theres-muck.pdf

which was traced to a chain of Belgian, British Virgin Islands and Maltese companies, behind which sat a mysterious Isle of Man trust. Thus the Mayfair address conveyed the aura of respectability whilst the LLP structure provided the maximum obscurity from which to perpetrate the fraud. It is thus not surprising that Private Eye describes the LLP, as the “international criminal’s corruption vehicle of choice” to launder the ill-gotten gains of dictators, drug money and other proceeds of crime. According to the prestigious Chatham House, perhaps even more insidious is the influence gained by foreign kleptocrats now resident in the UK, not only to influence the nexus of professionals who facilitate their shady transactions, but also to compromise politicians at the highest level and to intimidate journalists and researchers from delving too closely into their affairs.⁶¹⁰

Anne Applebaum and Quinn Slobodian have focused attention on the rise of states that are not just tax havens but also “bridging jurisdictions’ or hybrid states such as the United Arab Emirates and Krygyzstan that are on the one hand part of the legitimate system of trade and finance while on the other hand they launder the proceeds of theft or drug-sales, enable “rogue” countries and individuals to evade sanctions and for foreigners under those sanctions to become citizens. At the same time and with no hint of irony, market libertarians herald “statelets” such as Liechtenstein, Monaco and Singapore as “Davids fighting a globalist regulatory Goliath”. Slobodian writes that Liechtenstein, a place tailor-made for wealth is cast by market radicals as a victim of “financial capitalism”.⁶¹¹ In addition to the alliances struck between Venezuela, Iran and Cuba mentioned by Applebaum (2024), a growing network of states facilitate money laundering, including shipments of gold through Hong Kong, and the transport of indentured labour and environmental crime involving the UAE.⁶¹² Since the second Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Russia has been facilitated in evading sanctions on military technology and trade, most obviously by North Korea and China, but also by Hungary, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where “Special Economic Zones” enable relabelling and re-export of electronic components and through “flag-switching” as when in 2022, 300,000 tonnes of Kazakh crude oil were channelled through the Druzhba pipeline into Slovakia and the Czech Republic, thus obscuring the origin of Russian oil. “In short, Budapest is helping Moscow hide in the shadows of collective trade.”⁶¹³ It should also be mentioned that European countries such as Scotland continue to enable exports of Russian gas as can be testified to by the operations of Seapeak based in Glasgow.

⁶¹⁰ Chatham House (2021) The UKs Kleptocracy Problem: How servicing post-Soviet elites undermined the rule of law, 8th December. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/uks-kleptocracy-problem>
Murphy, Richard (2022). Russia, and London. <https://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2022/02/12/russia-and-london/>

⁶¹¹ Slobodian, 2024, 145).

⁶¹² Themis, *Exploring The Nexus Of Sanctions And Trade-Based Financial Crime In Hong Kong*. Also, *UAE financial crime: Environmental Financial Crime Risk Mitigation*. Accessed August 2025.

⁶¹³ Robert Lansing Institute, (2025). *Hungary’s Sanctions Evasion Nexus: Economic Ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as a Backdoor for Russia*, 6th June.

Conclusion

This chapter has roamed widely and variously across topics that in my view are deserving of further attention. Globally, this is a time of transition from the 'rules based order' that prevailed under US hegemony since the Second World War, to what is likely to become an intensifying struggle between rival blocs for dominance. As the virtual revolution gathers pace this will be most evident in the construction of rival platforms, robotics, AI and drone technologies and in competition to secure the resources from which to produce these. As the rules-based order gives way to one based on raw power, small countries will effectively lose any independence they once enjoyed and will effectively become client states of one bloc or another.

Until the election of Trump-47, it had been thought that the youthful owners of FAANG wielded unlimited power. Now the president deploys the levers of state power in an autocratic manner by restricting the issuance of visas amongst other means to let them know that he is boss and they are his supplicants. At the same time he bullies erstwhile allies in Europe and Asia to water down or drop their regulations on these behemoths. Meanwhile graduate jobs availability has dropped by 30 percent in June this year, with the lowest success rate in thirty years, raising fears of the encroachment of Artificial Intelligence into white collar jobs.⁶¹⁴

As the challenges presented by global heating become more acute, water and food security are becoming pressing issues, as is the growing challenge presented to host country governments by many millions of displaced migrants. Pressure on treasuries will mount due to demands from rapidly aging populations and decreasing fertility rates amongst the young. If Piketty is correct in his assessment, then a tipping point may be reached when the young demand their fair share of resources. Paradoxically, at the same time as the hardening of different blocs, the counter-trend described by Slobodian (2023) towards 'crack-up' capitalism is likely to intensify, as capital seeks more spaces free of state regulation and control. Indeed we are already living in an era where capital is welcomed by despots in jurisdictions where many relations are contractual.

Before finishing I ought to offer an extremely brief reflection on developments in marketing practice and the marketing academy over the past fifty years. In the UK the academic discipline took on a more professional gloss in the 1990s, at a time when the number of journals expanded.⁶¹⁵ While the role of the marketing practitioner has changed dramatically with the advent of social media, consultants still fret about the tussle between the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) and Chief Finance Officer (CFO) in the 'C'-Suite. In a telling comment from one report,

Some CEOs think CMOs aren't measuring the appropriate markers and are overly focused on the metrics that matter only to them. Others in the C-suite view marketing as tangential to a

⁶¹⁴ Staton, B., (2025). It's been a terrible year to graduate and find a job. Financial Times, 30th August.

⁶¹⁵ In the UK the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) was founded in 1911 aimed at marketing practitioners, while the needs of academics were catered to by the Marketing Education Group (MEG) which held annual conferences from 1972 1996 when it was rebadged with the more sonorous title of the Academy of Marketing as a bid to professionalize the discipline..

company's real business. As one CMO at a consumer company tells us, "CFOs often view marketing as a cost center rather than an investment."⁶¹⁶

Back to the Future! While, if the above has any substance, traditional marketing may be on something like an eternal loop, nation branding has grown apace, as governments vie with others to attract capital. Slobodian mentions the particular success enjoyed by Singapore and Dubai, noting that the tourists, investors and professionals who are attracted to these places do not appear concerned with the knowledge that these are autocracies. Although Amnesty International reported that in 2024 Saudi Arabia executed one hundred and ninety six people nation-branding consultants found that the concern for democracy rated lowly if at all for those moving to these countries from Western democracies, who consider their home countries as sluggish and messy as compared to the clear unity of strategy and messaging by the autocratic rulers of these states.⁶¹⁷ Autocratic sentiments are now expressed openly in Britain and France as an antidote to economic decline and paralysis in government, despite the continuing depredation of core democratic institutions in the USA by the Trump-47 regime.

Away from the continuing vicissitudes of the boardroom, life for social marketers has been good, if the number of publications by Philip Kotler serves as an index. Publishing over one hundred single and joint-authored books, many in several editions over a long career, Kotler has kept the flame of marketing and especially of social marketing alight, successfully promoting the application of marketing technology to a range of social issues from persuading individuals to wear seatbelts to the marketing of health care, places, tourism and hospitality, cities, the performing arts, celebrities - even nation-states.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ Bettati, A. J. Jacobs, K. Robinson & R. Tas, (2025). The CMO's comeback: Aligning the C-suite to drive customer-centric growth. *McKinsey*, 16th June.

⁶¹⁷ Slobodian, (223, 183).

⁶¹⁸ Kotler.org lists a stupendous 101 books he has produced singly or co-authored, many in several editions! My cursory check indicates a range of topics from 1975 marketing for nonprofits in 1975; professional services in 1984 (2 edns.), health-care (with Clarke), 1987, professionals as celebrities, 1988 (3 edns.), religious marketing places and cities (with Rein and Haider), Marketing places Europe (with Rein, Haider, Asplund), 1999, Marketing places Asia (with Hamlin, Rein, Haider), 2001, Sustainable marketing in Asia, 2001, marketing tourism and hospitality, 1999 (3 edns.), an Asian perspective (with Ang, Leon, Tan), 1996 (3 edns.), marketing of nations, (with Jatusrpitak, and Suvit Maesincee), 1997, performing arts (with Scheff), 1997; marketing the public sector (with Lee), 2006; Strategic marketing for health, (with Shalowitz and Stephens, 2008; marketing Chaotics (with Caslione, 2009). The CMO's comeback: Aligning the C-suite to drive customer-centric growth, *McKinsey*, 16th June.

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Chapter Six: One-Dimensional Power: From Dahl to Social Movement Theory

Introduction

The American political theorist Robert Dahl remains as the most significant theorist of liberal power. He is equally well known for his contribution to the liberal understanding of democracy and the preservation of values of equality and freedom, especially for minorities. Dahl advocated the form of democracy called polyarchy, or representative democracy outlined in the last chapter, based on open competition between parties, which he contended is the most appropriate form of democracy for the complex large-scale societies of today. Polyarchy arises in societies made up of a plurality of interests arising from differences in social class, ethnicity and religious and sexual orientation, amongst others.

Dahl experienced a huge number of changes over the course of a long life; as a longshoreman and union activist; a soldier who served in the Second World War; experiencing the postwar consumer boom and subsequent disquiet with big government, big business and marketing practices; the oil-shock of the 1970s and its aftermath; the slow rise of neoliberalism; the fall of communism and the supposed triumph of democracy; a new wave of globalization, of western de-industrialization and rapid growth in Asia; the spectacular development of the Internet and of the vast corporations that control it; “9/11”; the Gulf War; the Credit Crunch, and its aftermath; subsequent calls for the repatriation of industry to Western countries; growing sensibility to climate borne calamity.⁶¹⁹ Dahl, who, like his predecessor Tocqueville, worried about the tyranny of the majority and thus sought to limit the threat to democracy from populism, died in 2014.

This chapter is divided into three unevenly sized sections in an attempt to render it more readable. Part one outlines Robert Dahl’s theory of power and discusses his views on freedom, the market, corporations and worker democracy in order to provide some balance to the idea that he was a social conservative. Part two offers a basic model of the operation of power in business and marketing as a vehicle to outline the roles played by government, business and interest groups. This is further illustrated through discussion of the ‘McLibel’ case which offers a means to critique aspects of Dahl’s theory and to suggest that some of these can be addressed through an approach from social movement theory. Part three, which discusses the international context of power is largely taken up by a case analysis of child labour in Bangladesh. Finally, section four briefly discusses direct action beyond the law and responses to this by the state.

⁶¹⁹ Hochschild, J. (2014). Robert Dahl, scholar, teacher, democrat and mensch. *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/11/robert-dahl-scholar-teacher-democrat-and-mensch/>

Section One: Robert Dahl on Power

Much has changed in US and world politics in the seventy years and indeed, during his lifetime Dahl, for whom equality and perceived fairness are essential to the preservation of democracy, expressed concern about the threat posed by growing acceptance of arguments for unregulated markets, the rapid growth of unaccountable multinational corporations beyond the reach of national governments, and increasing disparity in income and wealth between rich and poor. These issues are discussed later below in relation to questions of rationality, equality and the size of corporations where Dahl's arguments are read alongside those of contemporary theorists. First, I briefly describe his study of power.

The New Haven Study

In relation to power, Dahl is best known for conducting the study in New Haven Connecticut to test the hypothesis that community politics is organised by a shadowy business elite. While rigorous, the focus of the research programme on overt behaviour subsequently drew criticism that it ignored machinations behind the scenes to frame the agenda for discussion. Dahl was an empiricist who argued that it is important to learn how democracy works in practice (Mayhew, 2015). He focused on developing big, broad, questions that he sought to answer by formulating propositions, collecting data and subjecting this to quantitative analysis. For instance, he asked whether democracies are more likely to emerge as countries become economically developed or do they emerge independently of this? Research by Chibub et al., (1996) along similar lines found that to expect a country to have a democracy in the coming year, then an existing democracy, affluence, growth with moderate inflation, declining inequality, a favourable international climate and parliamentary institutions are important.⁶²⁰ Linked to this, Przeworski (2000) studied the relations between democracy and dictatorship and economic development.

In their study of power, Dahl's research team utilised a combination of interviews, aggregate voting records, newspaper articles and historical research to test hypotheses on political decision-making in New Haven Connecticut. The choice of this small coastal town makes more sense to the outsider when one learns that New Haven is sometimes referred to as "the greatest small city in America" and is where the research team from Yale University was based. It was widely thought at the time of Dahl's research that decision making in towns such as New Haven was dominated by a clandestine clique of business interests. Dahl's team studied the role played by prominent individuals in relation to three issues, utilising a combination of interviews, aggregate voting records, newspaper reports and historical research. Whilst subscribing to a positivist nomothetic approach Dahl's team employed mixed methods in the New Haven study on power. Graduate students conducted many of the forty-six interviews in addition to which Dahl supervised three sample surveys, leading to the production of detailed event charts. Dahl

⁶²⁰ This was of 135 countries between 1950 and 1990.

also used aggregate voting data and an array of material over a century from sources such as the US census, city directories and historical works.⁶²¹

From this study Dahl rejected the hypothesis that decisions in New Haven were controlled by an elite but rather that power relations changed from a Puritan oligarchy that in the nineteenth century controlled virtually all resources, to the situation prevailing by the mid-twentieth century where power was dispersed between a plurality of groups, defined by social-class, ethnicity, profession and religion, partly because no interviewee hinted at the existence of such a cabal⁶²². He concluded from this study that politics in New Haven was characteristic of liberal pluralism, where successful decisions were the outcome of coalitions involving key individuals such as the mayor and representatives of groups with different interests.

Dahl's Theory of Power

Dahl approach to researching power was positivist, concerned to provide an empirical basis for power in decision-making that enabled this to be observed and measured in practice, as a capacity that is exercised by one individual over another,

My intuitive idea of power is that A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957a: 203/4).

Moreover this relation could be expressed in terms of probabilities;

P1 = The probability that the object actor will act in the desired direction with threat of action.

P2 = The probability that the object actor will act in the desired direction without the threat of action.

$M = P1 - P2$: is a measure of the so-called powerful actor's power.

A's power over B is at a maximum when $P1 = 1$ and $P2 = 0$. When $M = 0$, no power relation exists. Negative power arises in the situation where $P1 = 0$ and $P2 = 1$, where B might have acted voluntarily in the direction expected by A, but would be unresponsive to threats from A. This suggests that B will do the opposite of what A's wants her to do, once B knows A's intention.

Bases of Power

In chapter one I mentioned Dahl's example of the power of the professor over her students based on her authority to assign grades. In society at large, wealth and property constitute important bases of power, as wealthy individuals can hire and fire at will and are able effectively to 'call the shots' in subtle and not-so-subtle ways over those they wish to silence. In a particularly notorious example, Yevgeniy Prigozhin issued a "Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation" (SLAPP) action against Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat, who had alleged, correctly as it turned out, that Prigozhin was head of the

⁶²¹ Mayhew, (2017, 346).

⁶²² Dahl, (1961: 185).

Wagner mercenary group. A legal individual can take an action for libel for two reasons, either to eliminate the action that caused the suit to be raised, or to be awarded of financial compensation for harm caused by the defendants. In a SLAPP action it is only the former reason that matters, which is to ensure that the annoying activities will be discontinued, or that the opposition will be nullified when the very expensive issue in time and resources is brought before the courts. By means of the SLAPP the billionaire Progozhin, (who was actually sanctioned by the UK government at the time), was given free rein to legitimately harassed Higgins and almost ruined him financially, stifling the freedom of Bellingcat to reveal what turned out to be the truth.

Control over information is an important base of power which can range from that exercised by an expert in a particular field, to control of media reporting. Although the circulation of traditional newspapers has fallen sharply in recent years, ownership still enables those who control them access to the heights of government. Rupert Murdoch's ownership and control of newspapers once garnered him the moniker of "kingmaker" in UK and US elections.⁶²³ Given their reach the purchase of a newspaper to a foreign national is has been regarded as something to be wary of, so the sale in 2009 of the failing *London Evening Standard* to "former" member of the Russian intelligence service Alexander Lebedev, for £1 raised eyebrows in Whitehall, despite Lebedev stating that he had no interest in interfering in British politics.⁶²⁴

Today one-way communications media such as newspapers and TV are disparaged as "legacy media", dinosaurs that will soon be extinct in the new Wild West of the information age. Despite its relative recency, the growth in digital media has already had a profound effect on the daily life on the landscape by replacing "bricks and mortar" transactions with online communications, leading to a major shift in crime away from the physical to the virtual arena involving a mixture of escalating "ransomware" attacks on business by a mixture of bored teenagers, criminals and agents from malevolent states, and the duping of millions of consumers by scammers. Most insidiously, and most widely

⁶²³ In 2023 Murdoch, who owned Fox News, paid \$787.5 million to forestall a trial brought by Dominion. Fox had widely circulated false claims that Dominion's ballot-counting machines were used to manipulate the presidential election in favor of Democrat Joe Biden over then-President Donald Trump, a Republican. See, Coster Helen & Jack Queen, (2023). Fox settles Dominion lawsuit for \$787.5 million over US election lies. *Reuters*, April 19th. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/dominions-defamation-case-against-fox-poised-trial-after-delay-2023-04-18/>

Boris Johnson features in this rather murky tale. The *London Evening Standard* had supported Boris for London mayor, and when Lebedev passed his interest in the paper to his son Alexander, the latter stated that he would continue to support Boris.⁶²⁴ Lebedev Jnr. was subsequently witnessed hobnobbing with political heavyweights such as Tony Blair and George Osborne, one-time Chancellor of the UK Exchequer, who took up the role as editor, then editor-in-chief of the *London Evening Standard*. When he was Prime Minister Boris Johnson successfully nominated Alexander for the UK House of Lords, despite trenchant warnings against doing so from the UK security services; Johnson was reported as the first Prime Minister to have ignored such advice. As Prime Minister Johnson was also reported to have unusually met Lebedev secretly in Tuscany without his security detail. Sources, Harding, Luke & Mark Sweney, (2009). Russian Oligarch to Buy *London Evening Standard*. *The Guardian* Wed. 14th January. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/jan/14/russian-oligarch-alexander-lebedev-buy-london-evening-standard>. See also, Radden-Keefe, P. (2022). How Putin's Oligarchs bought London. *The New Yorker*, March 17th. Finally, Channel 4. (2023). Boris, the Lord and the Russian Spy. *Dispatches*. <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/boris-the-lord-the-russian-spy-dispatches>

commented upon, is the enablement of the deliberate spread of misinformation by anonymous actors on multiple platforms, from Facebook to X, 4Chan to 8Chan, or from Telegram to WhatAp, alongside tardy and negligible responses to requests to remove it. Driven by algorithms that deliberately promote sensationalist content in chasing ever higher revenues, crpies for help from parents such as those whose teenage children were encouraged to kill themselves online are ignored or whitewashed⁶²⁵, while the US President threatens any form of regulation with punitive action. Over and above this is the concern that the collective power of Meta, Amazon, Apple, Netscape and Alphabet is such that this poses a threat to democracy itself.

Dahl mentions looser forms of influence based on esteem, social standing, charisma and popularity. Additionally, some agencies such as the police, customs officers and tax collectors are sanctioned by the state to legitimately infringe on the free action of others in the interest of upholding the law.⁶²⁶ Solidarity, is also important for Dahl as the capacity of one member of society to evoke support from others who identify with that individual by seeing themselves like them in terms of a characteristic such as wealth, ethnicity, or religion.

In marketing contexts Dahl's conception of power is most often to be found in relation to relations between channel members and is based on the capacity to reward others.⁶²⁷ Michman and Sibley (1980), developed from Dahl seven bases of power in the distribution chain. The most important bases in their scheme are material, comprising the size of the firm and its command of resources. Economic bases relate indirectly to the other bases of power. Economic muscle can be leveraged through competitive advantage gained from the development of unique expertise in areas that are crucial to economic success. This success may in turn serve as the basis for emulation by other firms. Once developed, the sheer size and command of resources can then serve as a base to legitimize the establishment of a superior-subordinate relationship. Increased economic power also widens the scope of the firm's capacity to reward and punish suppliers and others that cross its path. For example, the retail giant Wal-Mart employs millions of people, has a turnover larger than that of many nation states and operates about 5,000 "big-box" stores in the USA which enables it to 'reward' firms that agree to work within its extremely tight cost-control policies and delivery schedules. The corporation has the power of life and death over small suppliers, particularly those in industrialising countries. Wal-Mart's unique knowledge lies in its ability to track real-time logistics and transactions data, an accomplishment that gained it the grudging respect of competitors.

⁶²⁵ Crawford, a. & B. Bell, (2022). Molly Russell inquest: Father makes social media plea. *BBC*, 30th September.

⁶²⁶ Dahl, (1961: 226). <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/textbook-slapp-oligarchs-libel-lawyers-reported-to-sra/5112544.article>

⁶²⁷ Brier & Stern, (1969).

Discussion

While acknowledging the rigour of Dahl's approach, Clegg (1989, 53) argues that the method Dahl and his team used in the New Haven study did not quite follow the precepts laid down in his work on power; for example, he did not include a comparative case. Moreover, Clegg notes that although Dahl constructs an 'agency' explanation of power, his focus, influenced by behaviourism, is entirely on responses to, or the effects of, power. Given this behaviourist influence Dahl was thus loath to incorporate anything 'within the skin' into his explanation, such as the intentions of A or B, that must be inferred as they are not open to direct observation. Clegg illustrates his point that this leads to a paradox with an example. Consider that B responds to an A without A having initially done anything overtly that would cause B to act in this way. Clegg asks how, in this situation, could B's responses be obtained without stimuli or causes, except by means of intentions?⁶²⁸ Thus, a problem with Dahl's explanation is that unlike Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber and Denis Wrong, Dahl excludes intentions from his explanation. As we shall see below another major difficulty is that Dahl's model does not take context into account.

Dahl's conclusion has also been criticised on the grounds that his framing of pluralism in terms of polyarchy was too narrow, omitting consideration of the exclusion of groups from political representation, the low levels of participation in politics, and the uneven allocation of resources between different groups.⁶²⁹ Where Dahl (1956;1961) had argued that all legitimate groups have the potential to make themselves heard, others warned of the undue influence exerted by wealthy elites and well-organised corporate interests (Domhoff, [1967], 2023).⁶³⁰

When I first came across theory of power, I made the mistake of imagining Dahl as a narrow behaviourist, positivist and empiricist. While all of that is indeed the case, when reading his work on politics and the economy more widely, I was surprised to discover a more radical side of his character that is quite different to the caricature. Below I briefly outline some aspects of this in relation to his concept of freedom, the operation of the market, the growing power of corporations and his arguments for the establishment of a worker democracy.

Dahl on Freedom

Although committed to the principal of freedom, MacGilvray (2015) notes the paradox that on the one hand Dahl espoused a negative view of this as freedom-from, while on the other, his arguments for the regulation of business and for other forms of intervention approximate to a positive form of power advocated by civic republicans. Dahl's

⁶²⁸ Clegg, (1989, 66).

⁶²⁹ See Newton, (1969). Stewart Clegg (59-65) provides a good summary of Newton's argument.

⁶³⁰ Developed by Domhoff, (1967) Power Structure research aims to "debunk the prevailing myths about American democracy and to advance an alternative view of power in America". The principal methodologies used are network analysis and content analysis. The *Who Rules America* website is well-maintained and has links to a number of useful resources. <https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu>

conception is negative in two respects; firstly, it is *not* concerned with enabling ‘the people’ to decide political outcomes, but rather to ensure that no one has unchecked decision-making power; and secondly, it is *not* concerned with developing people’s capacities to the fullest as is the case with civic republicanism, but rather seeks to ensure the existence of a competitive arena such that no one can impose their will unilaterally on the whole.⁶³¹

The paradox can be partially explained if not resolved by recognising that Dahl refers much more often to the importance of equality for the functioning of democracy and the lack of equality in today’s society. Although a liberal, Dahl was definitely no libertarian, nor did he subscribe to a neoliberal understanding of the economy.

Dahl on the Market

Dahl did not subscribe to the view that politics and the economy are separate spheres of activity⁶³², to argue instead that their close relation is evident in distinct forms of capitalism that emerged in different social and political contexts, ranging from the heavily taxed and highly redistributive systems prevalent in Scandinavia, where social equality is highly valued, to the low-tax, low-welfare system prevalent in the USA – as is surely now evident more than ever in the era of Trump-47. Indeed he argued that there was ‘a remarkable dearth of studies on the subject’ of the relations between business and politics, arguing the need to study the scope and magnitude of corporate influence. He was not only interested to discuss this in relation to “big” politics but also in relation to local communities, for instance,, by noting differences between Aitken, South Carolina, where Dupont executives appeared to dominate the local community in a way that General Electric executives did not, in Schenectady.⁶³³

While broadly subscribing to market principles Dahl differed from neoliberals in several important respects. Firstly, he argued that markets are not natural and do not arise spontaneously, but are historical formations produced by government action. Relatedly, he did not believe that markets are self-regulating, but require intervention from government, for instance, to protect property rights, ensure competitive markets, authorise ownership of economic entities, enforce contracts and prevent monopoly.⁶³⁴

Dahl made his views on libertarianism plain, referring with a wry sense of humour to the free-market advocate Herbert Spencer in 1884, who complained of “horrendous legislative attacks on the sanctity of the free market” by campaigners who argued that it should be illegal for boys under twelve to be employed labouring in mines, and for the

⁶³¹ MacGilvary (2015) suggests that, ironically, the moral basis for Dahl’s argument rests on the Madisonian system that Dahl rejects. While like Madison, Dahl focuses on the republican aim of preventing the arbitrary exercise of power, rather than the democratic aim of securing popular control over elected officials Dahl departs from Madison when arguing that the success of this project should depend on social rather than constitutional factors.

⁶³² Dahl & Lindblom, (1953).

⁶³³ Dahl, (1959, 25).

⁶³⁴ Dahl, (1998). *On Democracy*, 173-177.

appointment of food safety inspectors.⁶³⁵ From his analysis of the nineteenth-century British economy, Dahl shared the concern of John Stuart Mill (1848), that the unfettered operation of the market can result in morally repugnant outcomes and that markets must be regulated if they are to operate humanely in a manner conducive to democracy. In these respects, his position seems closer to the position of the German ordoliberals than the neoliberals. From Polanyi, Dahl developed two fundamental axioms; that unregulated markets inevitably inflict harm on some people; and that if people harmed by the market have the freedom to do so, they will attempt to regulate the market to eliminate the harm they perceive.⁶³⁶

Dahl criticized neoclassical economists' conception of homo economicus, "as a supremely rational computer" and also because their narrow focus on buyers and sellers in the context of exchange excludes consideration of the wider political context of the citizen. In a paper late into his career, he alluded to the neoliberal assumption of Pareto optimality that markets are more efficient at allocating resources at given prices. While acknowledging the argument that market economies are more efficient at allocating resources at given prices than are command economies, Dahl retorted tongue in cheek that, "If a competitive market economy produces socially optimal outcomes, why have all democratic countries adopted seemingly more inefficient alternatives that necessarily produce suboptimal outcomes?"...(which suggests an), "egregious incapacity of citizens and leaders to make rational judgements".⁶³⁷ He also countered assertions that unregulated market economies allow more room for individual freedom and can build self-reliance, by arguing that those who are damaged by the market will regard such arguments as nothing more than propaganda.

Dahl on the Power of Corporations

Writing early on, Dahl (1958) had argued that corporations can present a serious challenge to democracy because of their command of resources and their unified organization.⁶³⁸ From then on he expressed mounting concern (Dahl, 1989, 1990, Dahl & Levi, 2009), in relation to the power amassed by multinational corporations, for even at the time when he first wrote, capitalism had seriously compromised the democratic process in the USA, undermining political equality by generating massive inequalities in wealth, status, and control of information and enabling the rise of an elite that deploys resources to further its interests over the majority of citizens. Back then Dahl had argued that the growing size and lack of accountability of business posed a direct threat to democratic institutions, as the corporate leviathans of his time and the individuals who managed and owned them were beyond the legal jurisdiction and reach of the nation-state.⁶³⁹ He was concerned that not all the democratic institutions in his country

⁶³⁵ Dahl, (1993, 267).

⁶³⁶ Ibid., (267)

⁶³⁷ Ibid., (269-271).

⁶³⁸ See also Mizruchi & Hirschman, (2010).

⁶³⁹ Dahl, (1970). *After the Revolution*, 98.

operated with the degree of independence accorded to them. For instance, on the basis of his analysis of Supreme Court judgements, Dahl (1957b) held out little hope that the US judiciary would ever act as a brake on the power of the executive, a matter that is nowadays of considerable interest and concern.⁶⁴⁰

Dahl would no doubt be dismayed and even shocked by the overt demands and threats made by the Trump-47 regime to governments in the UK, EU and South Korea in seeking to protect the rights of their citizens from the predations of US owned Big Tech. This pressure coincided with EU investigations into X, Apple and Meta.⁶⁴¹ Such is the lack of competitiveness, concentration and unaccountability of this industry that with the overt endorsement of Trump-47 it seems able to act with impunity. Democrats worry that the unelected owners of these corporations have the capacity to control entire markets, posing a threat to democracy through the constant drip-feed of toxic mis-information and the danger this poses to the basic rights of citizens by objectifying them through the collection and sale of their data based on facial recognition and of their everyday habits and social interactions.⁶⁴²

It is worth mentioning that government agencies worked hand-in-glove with business interests even when Dahl first wrote. It is quite likely that he did not know that In 1953, while he was refining his theory of polyarchy, that the CIA successfully put into action plots to overthrow the democratically elected governments of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh of Iran (with the British) and President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, to serve the respective interests of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum or BP) and the American Fruit Company, better known to consumers through its brand Chiquita.⁶⁴³ However, surely he must have known something of the CIA involvement in 1970 in the downfall of the democratically elected Allende regime in Chile?⁶⁴⁴

Dahl On The Need For Worker Democracy.

For Dahl, size matters. He justified polyarchy on the ground that direct democracy is not feasible given the size and complexity of modern society. He similarly argued that the changing size and scope of business organization requires democratic oversight and control as competition between small businesses has given way to oligopolistic

⁶⁴⁰ See also, Pikkety, (2021), Sunstein et al. (1998) and Posner, (1997) for a dissenting opinion. References at the end of chapter five.

⁶⁴¹ Moens, B.; A. Bounds & Laura Dubois, (2025). EU stands its grounds on digital rules despite Trump's warning. *Financial Times*, 26th August; Moens, B. & H. Foy, (2025). Vallet, C. (2025). EU rocked by Trump's attack on digital regulation. *Le Monde*, 29th August; EU antitrust chief urges defiance of US. *Financial Times*, 30th August, 4.

⁶⁴² Calabrese, S, & R. Virah-Sawmy, (2025). Big tech is avoiding responsibility: here's what the EU can do about it. *European Democracy Hub.*, 26th March.

⁶⁴³ Haines, G.K. (1995). CIA and Guatemala assassination proposals 1952-1954. *CIA Historical Review Program Release as Sanitized* 1997. CIA, (2023). FILE 013: PART II - The Side of the Argo Mission You've Never Heard – Exfiltration, 14th September. *The Langley Files, CIA's Podcast*.

⁶⁴⁴ Whiting, Van R., Jr., Political Mobilization and Breakdown of Democracy in Chile, vol. 1. *Latin American Issues* [On-line], 1. Available: <https://sites.allegheeny.edu/latinamericanstudies/latin-american-issues/volume-1/>

competition administered by massive corporations, leading to an unprecedented concentration of wealth and power. That Dahl was not alone amongst theorists in calling out the danger presented by large corporations is evidenced by a quote at the time from Menninger that, ‘political scientists are likely to judge the large corporation’s concentration of resources and wealth to be an anomaly that upsets the balance between democracy and capitalism’.⁶⁴⁵

Dahl later argued that the corporation is a political system in its own right. Although it is a public institution, the corporation is a hierarchy that eludes democratic standards of accountability even though its leaders hold direct power over employees, consumers suppliers and local communities, and enjoys access to leading politicians and high officials that is denied to the ordinary citizen. He argued that as political systems operating within a democratic polyarchy corporations should be governed by democratic processes.

Similar to J.K. Galbraith, Dahl was concerned by the emergence of a self-serving managerial elite that is autonomous from shareholders and from the public.⁶⁴⁶ Consequently, he argued the need for ‘serious scrutiny’ of the internal governance of corporations and of their influence on the political system.⁶⁴⁷ Political scientists needed to better understand what was going on by conducting research into the internal workings of corporations and into their influence on members of the wider political system.⁶⁴⁸ This remains pertinent today as in recent decades managerial control has been increased through share buybacks linked to increased remuneration for executives.⁶⁴⁹ Their level of excess was such that it led US Senators Chuck Shumer and Bernie Sanders to write that, “at a time of huge income and wealth inequality, Americans should be outraged that these most profitable companies are laying off workers while spending billions of dollars to boost their share value to further enrich the few.”⁶⁵⁰ In the face of this massive

⁶⁴⁵ Menninger, (1985), in Vogel, (1987, 387).

⁶⁴⁶ Hoffman, (2003, 124). However, as noted by Mizruchi and Hirschman, (2010), Galbraith differed from Dahl by arguing for “countervailing power”. In this view firms have conflicting interests which effectively cancel themselves out, thereby preventing business from constituting a unified political force. This argument predates his ideas about the “technostructure”, that control was no longer vested in managers but in technocrats “who bring specialized knowledge, talent or experience to group decision making”.

⁶⁴⁷ Dahl, (Theory of Democracy, 819)

⁶⁴⁸ Excerpt from Dahl (1959) in *Theory of Democracy* (ch. 55) cited in Hoffman, (2003, 225).

⁶⁴⁹ 30% of all listed companies bought back their shares in 2023. See the post by Seigne, M. and J.R.Osterrieder (2023), Implementation of Share Buybacks and Their Impact on Corporate Governance. *Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance*. “We found that 46% used per share metrics such as earnings per share (EPS) or cash flow per share in their executive short-term and/or long-term incentive plans. Our research shows that of these companies that use per share metrics, 76% either don’t adjust for buybacks when determining incentive payouts or are silent in the disclosures about the use of adjustments” (Ringlee et al., 2023). See Ringlee, L.; M. Madu and J. Ogelsby, (2023) Share Buybacks and Executive Compensation: Assessing Key Criticisms. *Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance*, 16th July.

⁶⁵⁰ Power, Thomas, (2020). Share Buybacks and Income Inequality. *Articles*. 12.
<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/engineducart/12>

concentration of wealth and power Dahl called for an economy managed by workers.⁶⁵¹ There was a radical edge to his call for citizens to become more directly engaged in politics when at work and in their own localities as while,

he does not dwell on it, the realization of worker democracy would entail a breathtaking restructuring of American government and society, regardless of which of the various incarnations.⁶⁵²

Moreover, Dahl's argument to subordinate private property rights to the interests of the larger public would have had profound implications, as to implement these ideas would involve a complete overhaul of private ownership rights.⁶⁵³ Dahl had argued that it was "absurd" to extend Locke's arguments for private property rights to ownership or control of corporations and that,

any large economic enterprise is in principle a public enterprise. It exists not by private right but only to meet social goals. Questions about these social goals, and the comparative advantages and disadvantages of different forms, are properly in the public domain, matters for public discussion, choice and decision, to be determined collectively by processes that satisfy the criteria of procedural democracy (*Theory of Democracy*, 746–747).

Hoffman summarizes that, "In other words, a regime of strict property rights may be appropriate for small-scale capitalism, but not for modern, corporate capitalism",⁶⁵⁴ and corporations where ownership rights are divorced from managerial control should no longer be treated as private. Even more than instituting local democracy, worker participation would approach the democratic ideal, leading to greater material equality by diffusing the gains from ownership of property more widely, and by halting ever-spiralling differentials between salaries paid to executives and those lower down the scale. For Hoffman, Dahl was caught in a "theoretical bind", on the one hand by setting out a radical vision for deepening democracy in business and in cities and localities, while on the other, he espoused the liberal belief that individuals know their interest best and from experience, that most individuals suffer from a 'motivation deficit', in that they are not particularly concerned to become more involved.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵¹ Dahl, (1970). *After the Revolution* chapter 3.

⁶⁵²Hoffman, (2003, 130).

⁶⁵³ Dahl, (1998). *Theory of Democracy*, (744–746), In Hoffman, (2003)

⁶⁵⁴ Op Cit., 131.

⁶⁵⁵ Op. Cit., 136.

Section Two: Exploring Power in Business and Marketing

In the New Haven study that informed *Who Governs*, Dahl (1961) examined decision making in three issue-areas; urban redevelopment, public education, and political party nominations. Those who successfully initiated policy proposals in these areas were judged as being the most influential. Because the scope of Dahl's theory of power was narrow, involving just two individuals, A and B, it has been used to explore bilateral power relations in business-to-business contexts. For instance, of the many examples in the marketing literature Brier and Stern (1969) discuss the case of a large retailer that chooses to ignore the fair-trade policy of a manufacturer.⁶⁵⁶ However, relations between business and consumers are more complex as they are mediated in important ways by

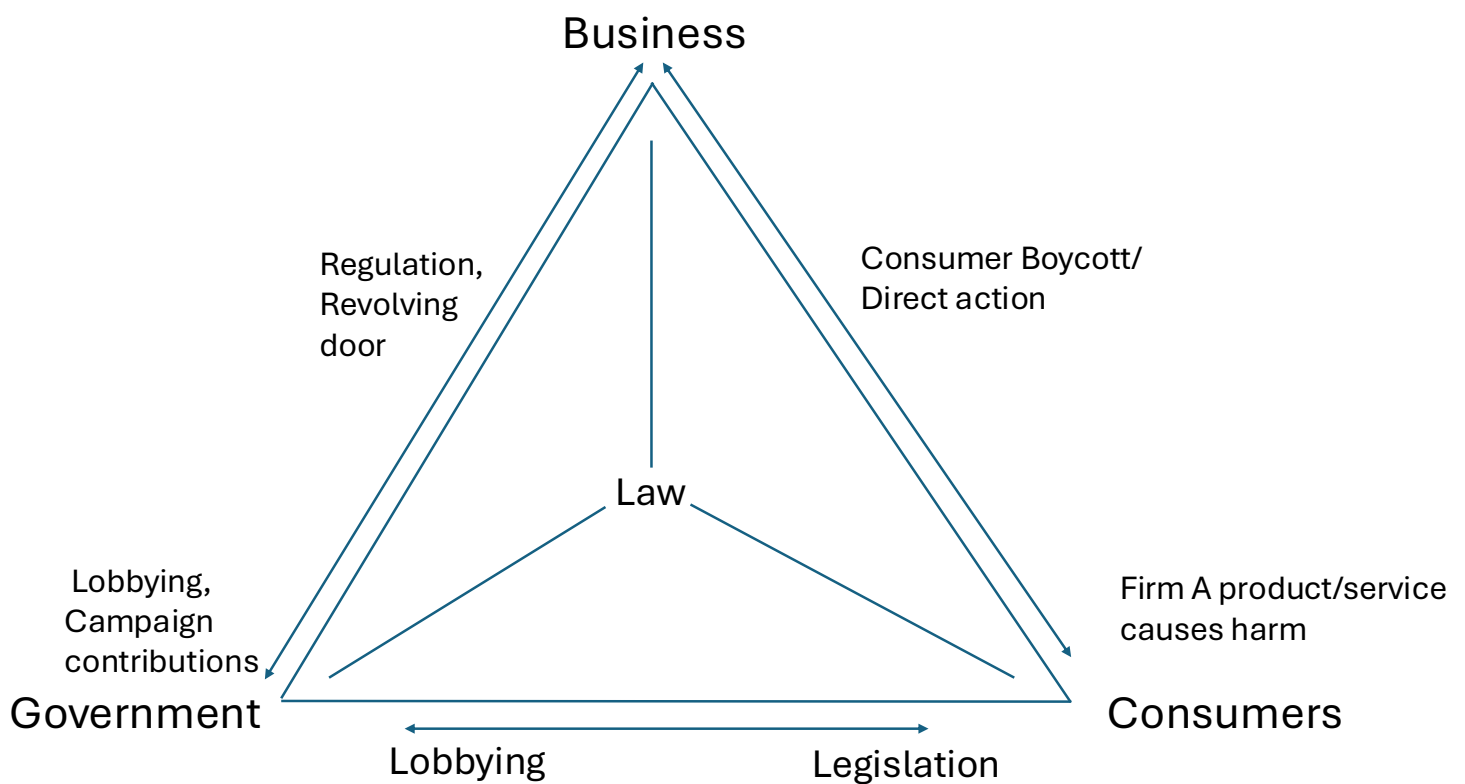


Figure 6.1: Relations Between Different Interests

government, as illustrated in the Figure below.

⁶⁵⁶ Brier, (1969, 125).

The context includes relations between government, business and representative groups of consumer interests as well as self-appointed groups of individuals who are concerned about the harms done to consumers or to third parties.

Business Consumer Relations

There has been much talk of the “empowered” consumer in marketing journals in recent years.⁶⁵⁷ As a consumer I am presumed to be the author of my own satisfaction as the one who ‘co-creates’ the meaning of what I consume, who fabricates an identity from the vast array of goods, services and experiences on offer that provide a ticket for my entry into a particular tribe. While introspection can be frowned upon it is sometimes useful to take one’s own experiences as a starting point to reflect on such matters and I must say that I personally find it difficult to recognize myself in the mirror that marketing holds up to me, which of course may qualify me as an irresponsible consumer.

As a consumer I do not feel powerful especially in relation to two broad categories of business. The first concerns my relations with local tradesmen who are often undependable and who, when they eventually do condescend to show up, seem to think that I have all the time in the world to listen to them spouting opinions that I imagine might have been shared by Genghis Khan. The second category involves remote and often frustrating encounters with utilities and telecoms providers, large corporations and the head-offices of local supermarkets with whom I have an ongoing dispute about their apparently inexhaustible enthusiasm to sheath everything they sell in plastic. At a time of climate crisis when the world is drowning in rubbish, corporations continue to seek to accrue maximum value to themselves by building obsolescence into products such as phones televisions, computers, lawnmowers - the list goes on and on - despite Vance Packard’s exposé of this practice almost seventy years ago.⁶⁵⁸ Then there are the multiform devious means to extract value, such as pack designs engineered to dispense too much, or alternatively are half full of air,

All in all I feel powerless; the tradesmen either ignore my requests or when they do eventually condescend to “squeeze me in”, they often fail to turn up; the retailers communicate replies to my missives in public-relations-speak, quite possibly formulated by an ex-student of marketing communications; the utilities, whose prices are usually within a whisker of each other, brazenly over-charge me unless I devote a half-day to bargaining them down to a still unreasonable offer; and the “customer satisfaction associate” smiles indifferently as I complain that my kettle expired after just two years. My feeling of being patronised when writing to large supermarkets about their extensive use of plastics was reflected in the findings of a large-scale study of business language on the

⁶⁵⁷ See for instance, Pires, G.D.; J. Stanton & P. Rita, (2006). The internet, consumer empowerment and marketing strategies. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40, 936-949. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:167735647> Also, Department of Business Innovation and Skills, (2012). Empowered consumers and growth: literature review. Gov UK, 31st July.

⁶⁵⁸ Packard, V., (1960). *The waste makers*, NY: David McKay & Co.

topic which concluded that this constructed a parent-child relation between business and customer.⁶⁵⁹

The more I get down to thinking about it the more there is to describe, from the ritual debasement when traveling with budget airlines to the multifarious ways in which peace of mind is hijacked by supraliminal, never mind subliminal messaging, the small frustrations of pack designs with labels at the back in fonts too small to read, and the constant blitz of advertising everywhere all at once. There is the paradox of choice, on the one hand the non-choice signified by the ubiquitous bland retail outlets that differ only in terms of their logo, and on the other, of over-choice, for instance, when faced by an entire aisle devoted to washing-powder or pet-food. Behind the façade and furthest from consciousness are the algorithms that silently steer my online attention and the bottom-feeders deliberately maintaining a “low profile” that lurk near the bottom end of supply chains, whether in the “meat-recovery” business or producing ‘forever’ chemicals sprayed on my food, furniture and gardens that now form part of “me”.

I do not think that my annoyances are out of the ordinary, as in the UK consumer affairs programmes on TV and radio often feature the situation where some customer, A, has been grossly overcharged by a dodgy B for defective work on their electricity-supply, roof, or garden. Other common complaints are raised against utility and broadband providers that arbitrarily raise their monthly charge, or mobile phone providers who charge exorbitant fees for services that no individual would ever use, such as “unlimited” texts. A common difficulty is that as business has progressively moved online, so we customers have no local retail outlet to visit where we can discuss our concern. Consequently, we complain of spending hours in a fruitless quest to have our concerns addressed.

From a liberal perspective the above account is one-sided, misplaced and curmudgeonly not only by excluding the fun, creative side of consumption, but mainly because everyone knows that while the individual consumer is powerless most of the time and in fact that most consumers are powerless most of the time, in the long run producers must serve the interest of consumers or fail. However, such reasoning omits to acknowledge, as Keynes famously did, that in the long run we are all dead. In capitalism, it seems that in the “short run” consumers have to hope to rely on a third party wielding a big stick to protect them from harm.

Government-Consumer-Relations

it ought to be mentioned that Dahl’s idea of what constitutes an ‘individual’ is elastic and can encompass a group, an office, such as President, a government, or even a nation-state. Although he did not devote himself overmuch to discussing the question of economic representation, one can surmise that this would follow in line with his argument for representative government, to wit, that the vast majority of consumers have neither the time nor the concern to directly express their concern to business, which in any event should be respond generally their needs through the action of the price mechanism, so

⁶⁵⁹ Mehl, (2022).

ought to be content to place the responsibility to represent their interest in the hands of a representative group such as the Consumer's Association.

When it comes to relations between government and consumers what most obviously comes to mind is consumer protection. While this is discussed further below, I next consider how legislators can play a much more central role in the construction of the consumer. A profound way in which the legislature is involved with consumption lies in its ability to abrogate the right of the individual to decide what is good for them or alternatively to reverse this by extending negative power to those previously regarded as lacking capacity to decide for themselves. This was illustrated in the description of the case of Sammy that is described in chapter five who habitually chooses food that is bad for his health and purchases items such as mobile phones on a whim and then quickly discards them, against the better judgement of his carers. In A/b terms Sammy seems to be top dog but is he?

The basis of the negative power accorded to Sammy to freely choose what he wants derives from UK government legislation enacted in the 1990s. An Act of Parliament allotted responsibility for community care to local Councils⁶⁶⁰, while *Putting People First: A shared vision and commitment to adult social care protocol*, (2007) delegated payments by offering personal budgets to 'those who are eligible', 'promoting person-centred planning with a greater emphasis on self-assessment and management; 'offering direct payments to enable users to plan and purchase their own care'; and 'involving relatives and carers in care planning'.

The difficulties that can arise in the gap that emerges between the short-term satisfaction of desire versus the individual's long-run interests, pointed to by Kotler (1972), is starkly evident in this case. Sammy's carer mentioned the wastefulness and poor health outcomes that ensued from Sammy's "free" choices, which he found hard to thole and to stand apart from, never mind Sammy's routine exploitation by callous relatives and third parties. Such abuses were most probably unforeseen at the time the legislation was enacted. Despite this Sammy proclaims himself happy to be in control, raising the question as to the grounds on which it can be argued that Sammy should be denied his moments of happiness? On the other hand, Sammy's carer argues from the perspective of positive freedom that Sammy's long-run interest will be better served if others can make decisions on Sammy's behalf. This raises the further question as to why should there be one rule for Sammy and a different rule for everyone else, given that wastefulness and poor health outcomes such as obesity and Type-Two diabetes are not exclusively restricted to his situation but are widespread throughout society? Questions such as the above which concern preferences and interests stray beyond Dahl's one-dimensional explanation and are considered more fully in chapter eight which discusses Steven Lukes' third dimension of power.

Consumer Protection

In the UK, quasi-governmental agencies have proliferated in the neoliberal era to regulate (or not) the actions of utilities, public transportation and other consumer necessities that

⁶⁶⁰ The National Health Service and Community Care Act, (1990).

were once run directly by government. Some of the most important are the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the “OFs”; Ofgem (Office of Gas and Electricity Markets); Ofwat (water); and OFcom that are supposedly devoted to protect the consumer interest. UK regulation and enforcement of anti-trust activity is conducted by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Antitrust activities are business practices that limit or block competition between firms and deny consumers access to goods at normally competitive prices. Vertical anti-trust involves the aim to capture the chain of activity that flows from producer to the marketplace whereas horizontal anti-trust involves two or more competitors who meet to fix the price of a product that each company produces.

In chapter five the influential role of neoliberal arguments promoted by the American jurist Robert Bork were outlined, who had successfully argued that the goal of anti-trust policy should be to maximize consumer welfare. While superficially this might seem to be a laudable aim, as Heyer points out, it is not what it seems, because Bork’s idea of welfare is, “unfortunate and confusing”.⁶⁶¹ This is because Bork equated consumer welfare with efficiency. By persuading the legal establishment of this logic Bork succeeded in effectively reversing anti-trust enforcement action in law that had previously sought to encourage competition by protecting small business owners. By equating consumer welfare to efficiency, Bork argued that the only reason why a merger might be tolerated is that the resulting entity would be more efficient than the entities it incorporates. He reasoned from this that the only difference between horizontal and vertical agreements is that in the latter mergers between firms can lead to greater efficiencies whilst with in the case of cartels they will not. Given this, whilst mergers might be tolerated, there ought to be no defence for price-fixing through the operation of a cartel (Bork, 1978: 66-67).⁶⁶²

Since the 1970s there has been a marked decline in anti-trust enforcement leading to growing unease at the vast size and market power of some corporations.⁶⁶³ While at time of writing the state has enjoyed some success in reining in the power of Big Tech in the USA,⁶⁶⁴ although in the chaos created by the Trump-47 regime it is very difficult to work out what is going on. In any event no-one can ever know the true extent of price-fixing and bid rigging in the economy. It may be unwise to use data for cases and convictions as a basis for generalisation as those caught out may merely be those who take the most chances because of the circumstances which they are in. Some historical studies link price-fixing to large poorly performing companies in profitable industries and more serious cases where the industry was also performing poorly. From one study it seems

⁶⁶¹ Heyer, (2014, s. 20).

⁶⁶² Bork was more cautious about mergers that would lead to a monopolistic position as motivated by the drive to control the market, distinguishing this from internal growth which he took as a sign of greater efficiency. The problem arose he adduced, in how to measure efficiency in a particular case, which he rejected in favour of a rule (Heyer, 2014.: 24).

⁶⁶³ See Yale School of Management, Antitrust Enforcement. Modern U.S. antitrust theory and evidence amid rising concerns of market power and its effects. Accessed July 2024.

⁶⁶⁴ Office of Public Affairs, (2025). *Department of Justice Prevails in Landmark Antitrust Case Against Google*. US Department of Justice, 17h April. This reports that United States et al. v. Google, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia held that Google violated antitrust law by monopolizing open-web digital advertising markets.

actual cases form the tip of a very large iceberg, where one antitrust lawyer mentioned that if the U.S. antitrust division tripled their staff, they would triple their cases.⁶⁶⁵

Food Standards

That the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) operates as an arm of government is testament to the visceral harm that business can do to consumers through the adulteration of food and drink. Government has long been directly involved in the regulation of these industries. In Britain prior to this the adulteration of staples such as bread, milk, beer, tea, coffee and confectionary was endemic (London, 2014). Thanks to the actions of nineteenth-century campaigners such as the chemist Frederick Accum and the medic Arthur Hill Hassall and the influence of medical journals such as *The Lancet*, bakers no longer add alum, chalk, or sawdust to their loaves, nor do brewers add flavour-enhancing substances, some containing strychnine, to their beer, in order to contain cost.⁶⁶⁶ Following years of debate, the British Government passed a Food Adulteration Act in 1860, although it took almost forty years for this to be fit for purpose. Despite this, new scandals occur periodically, from poisoning by campylobacter; E-Coli, to the horrific outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), which manifests in humans as Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD). In 2013, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) discovered that horsemeat unfit for human consumption labelled as beef was widely sold in a range of products including “beefburgers” through supermarkets and other retail outlets. The proportion of horsemeat in samples ranged from 30% to 80% and testing revealed that 85% of beefburgers also contained pigmeat. Although discovered in Ireland, this turned out to be an international scam involved importing cheap horsemeat from Canada, Belgium and Romania and sold as beef at considerable profit. While no companies were prosecuted custodial sentences were passed on individuals in Holland, France and the UK – one individual received a two-year sentence for mislabelling five hundred tonnes of meat. While the scandal led to a radical change in the regime of food testing this is no doubt not the last.⁶⁶⁷

Interest Groups

Dahl’s argument for polyarchy is based on the assumption that most individuals are apathetic in matters of politics and so are content to delegate the representation of their interests to others. Liberal pluralism is the political equivalent of economic liberalism in that it conceives of society as constructed of a plurality of competing groups, each of which is comprised of like-minded individuals who act rationally in pursuit of their self-interest. Interest group activity therefore provides more information between elections which allows the decision-makers within the state to weight preferences during the formulation of policy.

⁶⁶⁵ Jamieson, (1994).

⁶⁶⁶ Coley, N. (2017). The fight against food adulteration. Education in Chemistry. The Royal Society of Chemistry. <https://edu.rsc.org/feature/the-fight-against-food-adulteration/2020253.article>

⁶⁶⁷ O’Sullivan, B. (2023) A decade on how the horsemeat scandal changed the way the world thinks about food safety, *The Irish Times*, 7th January.

Between elections a variety of groups will emerge from civil society to coalesce around specific interests, selecting representatives to advocate their case to the government of the day. In light of concern about pollution “Mums for Lungs” formed as a pressure group to advocate for the reduction of road traffic in South London. On the other side a pressure group was formed by a bunch of angry motorists who were inconvenienced and increasingly frustrated by restrictions on speed and on road use.

The battle surrounding President Reagan’s nomination of Robert Bork to the US Supreme Court is illustrative of interest group activity. As a known conservative, a number of oppositional interest groups fought hard against Bork’s appointment, including, Common Cause, the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood and the National Mental Health Association. These groups made use of opinion polls and mass advertising in conducting their campaign, but nevertheless lost.

The Soda Tax

In March 2010 Mayor Nutter of Philadelphia announced the ‘Healthy Philadelphia Initiative’, comprising a two cents per ounce tax on all sweetened beverages sold in the city. This would raise the price of a twenty-ounce bottle of Coca-Cola by forty cents and a two-litre bottle by \$1.35. Of the \$77 million raised annually by this tax, he proposed that \$20 million would be spent on the provision of healthy eating programmes in the city. It was widely reported that a similar tax was being also under active consideration by the authorities in New York and San Francisco.

A soda tax was first mooted in 2008 in a report by the Congressional Budget Office. A supportive article was then published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, which argued that such a tax would reduce the growing problem associated with obesity. Linked to this the World Health Organization argued that this could help alleviate chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, which disproportionately affect the poorest in society. Another reason mentioned by the Mayor was the need to make up for the shortfall in revenue following the Credit Crunch.

Two interest groups actively opposed the tax; the Pennsylvania Beverage Association, and the Teamsters Union which opposed the tax for fear that this would decrease spending and jobs. Owners of small restaurants and refreshment outlets also reported concerns. Former mayor John F. Street opposed the tax, claiming that it would have a disproportionate effect on the poor. On the other side of the debate, Kelly D. Brownell of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University argued that the tax on sugar would have a direct ameliorating effect on obesity. Gary Foster, an academic at Temple University’s Center for Obesity Research also supported the tax.

The beverage industry lobby declared the tax dead, whilst advertising vigorously against it, amounting in 2009 to \$11 million from a total budget of \$18.9 million, which was more than 30 times the amount spent in 2008.⁶⁶⁸ The advertising campaign was attacked by New York State Health Commissioner Richard F. Daines, who argued that it was

⁶⁶⁸ Sussman, Beth (2010) Industry Spends \$18.9 million to fight tax. *National Journal: Under the Influence: An insight view of the lobbying and advocacy industry*. Jan. 29th <http://undertheinfluence.nationaljournal.com/2010/01/beverage-lobby-spent-189-million.php>

misleading because it argued that the proposed ‘soda tax’ could influence a person’s entire grocery bill.⁶⁶⁹ In reality, he said, the tax would only affect those drinks containing sugar. In April 2010, Angela Quitola, a citizen of Philadelphia confronted Mayor Nutter in an encounter that gained a lot of publicity. Quitola said that her husband worked for Coca-Cola and was concerned that he would lose his job if the tax was implemented.⁶⁷⁰

The soda tax was eventually introduced in 2017, amounting to 1.5 cents per ounce, raising the cost of a 2-litre soda bottle from about \$1.50 to \$2.50, with the money raised spent on enhancing childhood education. A small-scale follow-up study of low-income parents, most of them African American found that they strongly supported the use of the tax for education, although the authorities needed to be more transparent about how the money was spent. Overall, respondents broadly supported the tax.⁶⁷¹

The range of interests involved in the soda tax is fairly typical of those that tend to cluster around such issues today. On the one hand there are a range of corporate interests equipped with large advertising and promotional budgets. On the other side are ranged a disparate number of groups which also command a publicity budget, usually smaller in scale. Paid-for advertising does not necessarily play a major role. A well-planned and well-funded campaign may founder because of an incident such as that involving an individual, such as Mrs. Quitola. If Mayor Nutter had handled this encounter badly, the media could have gone into overdrive by replaying this incident to the detriment of his campaign, as UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown found to considerable cost to his cause on the eve of a general election.⁶⁷²

Although confrontations between “ordinary individuals” and politicians may be unintentional, they are increasingly organized as planned pseudo-events designed to spoil the prospects of an adversary. This practice is known as astroturf marketing, since US senator Lloyd Bentsen reputedly said, ‘a fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and AstroTurf’, has a long provenance.⁶⁷³ Over and above the harmful effects caused by disinformation caused by deceptive advertising, astro-turfing can “poison the well” by corroding trust in advocacy groups.⁶⁷⁴ Monbiot (2010) argues that astroturfing is a favoured strategy by pro-corporate anti-regulation campaigns that have sufficient funding to hire PR consultants. He mentions the example of online

⁶⁶⁹ http://www.health.state.ny.us/press/releases/2010/2010-02-10_beverage_lobby_steps_up_anti-soda_tax.htm

⁶⁷⁰ <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/politics/Cola-Confrontation-Woman-Fights-Mayor-Over-Sugar-Tax-86696452.html>

Edmondson, E., J. Shea, E. Gregory, C. Roberto, S. Garcia, J. Kwon, & S. Virudachalam, (2022). Low-income parents’ perceptions of a sweetened beverage tax in Philadelphia. *Journal of Nutritional Science*, 11, E67. doi:10.1017/jns.2022.64

⁶⁷² Lyall, S. (2010). In British race a stray remark haunts Brown. *The New York Times*, 28th April. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/world/europe/29brown.html>

⁶⁷³ See Boorstin, (1962) and for the quote (amongst several authors), Gittlitz, A.M. (2013). I was a political astroturfer. *Salon*. 14th April. https://www.salon.com/2013/04/14/i_was_a_political_astroturfer/

⁶⁷⁴ See Kang et al., (2015); Walker & Le, (2023), Chan, (2022).

messages by two individuals, “Mary Murphy” and “Andura Smetacek” who launched “ferocious attacks” on a scientist who had published research that Mexican corn had been widely contaminated by GM pollen. It transpired that these messages had come from a domain associated with internet PR agency the Bivings Group and that the IP address linked to Smetacek’s account was linked to Monsanto.⁶⁷⁵

Academics and campaign groups have noticed a dramatic and concerning increase in the scale of corporate lobbying of politicians in the European Union over the past ten years.⁶⁷⁶ This was confirmed in the most dramatic terms when a leading official was found to be in possession of a suitcase full of cash.⁶⁷⁷ Although dated, the study by Yu and Yu (2011) of major frauds conducted between 1998 and 2004, found that firms that lobby have a lower chance of being convicted of fraud and evade fraud detection for longer than those that do not; the authors found that fraudulent firms spent 77% more on lobbying than did not fraudulent firms.

Cause-Related Campaigns

In contrast to sectional interest groups such as the Consumers Association, cause-related groups are concerned to promote a particular issue. Given that the cause is not of direct benefit to them the individuals that form these groups are often motivated by religious or moral concerns. For instance, the *Don’t Make A Wave* Committee was established in 1970 with the aim to stop a second nuclear weapons test at Amchitka Island in the Aleutian islands, and in 1971, a small group embarked and sailed to Amchitka on *The Greenpeace*. Organizations such as Greenpeace International now engage in a wide range of activities including lobbying and litigation but also resort to direct action when deemed necessary, taking care to ensure that this is within the framework of national and international law. Some are more likely to cross the line by engaging in illegal activity if the individuals involved feel that they are outsiders and particularly if their world view is sufficiently apocalyptic (‘We’ve got to save the planet now, at all costs!’). A complicating factor is that the line between what is legal and what is not is not static but evolves as a game of cat and mouse, whereby new tactics are developed by activists in response the imposition of laws and penalties by the state.

Consumer Boycotts

The consumer boycott is the most acceptable form of protest to liberal thinking on the assumption that the dollar or pound in a consumer’s pocket is equivalent to a vote. In this view those offerings that receive the most ‘votes’ are rewarded for their success in giving the market what it wants. Liberals propose a simple solution for the person who

⁶⁷⁵ Monbiot, G. (2010). These astroturf libertarians are the real threat to online democracy. *The Guardian*, 13th December. He mentions Taki Oldham *Astroturf Wars* – a training film for *American Majority* on how to “manipulate the medium”, funded by the libertarian Sam Adams Alliance.

⁶⁷⁶ Corporate Europe Observatory, (2025). *The EU’s lobby league table Tech, Banking, Energy, Chemicals dominate*. <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2025/02/eus-lobby-league-table>. See also, Hanegraaph & Poletti, (2021).

⁶⁷⁷ O’Leary, N. (2022). A suitcase full of cash: European Parliament hit by Qatar corruption investigation. *The Irish Times*, 12th December.

doesn't like the product that a company produces, the service it offers, its environmental policies or the way in which it treats its workforce; withdraw your 'vote' and spend your money elsewhere. As a result, if enough people feel like you then competitive offerings that do take your preferences into account will emerge to displace the firm which displeases you. On the other hand, if other people do not see the situation in the way that you do, you may vote with your money, but nobody else will follow.

The rather loose definition of a boycott as, 'a concerted refusal to do business with a particular person or business in order to obtain concessions or to express displeasure with certain acts or practices of a person or business,'⁶⁷⁸ provides scope for a range of actions and targets; for instance, Garrett, (1987) mentions a boycott conducted by nuns against a theatre production. In the context of marketing boycotts have been organised to protest against a corporation's product offering (McDonald's, KFC), working conditions in its supply chain (Wal-Mart, Apple), unethical marketing practices (Nestlé), or by association (Starbucks association with Nestlé), or for links to an oppressive regime (as in the historic targeting of Barclays Bank for links to South Africa and currently, Israel).

From the above if a group of individuals in civil society believes that a business, or indeed a country, is misbehaving, then it is perfectly legitimate for them to seek to organize the collective "voting" behaviour of consumers as a tactic to put a stop to these. The boycott is one of the most prominent forms of action that has been deployed effectively as a weapon in some of the most famous cases of A/b power. While it is not a last resort, boycotts often come to the fore when more conciliatory approaches have been rebuffed. While some boycotts such as Buy Nothing Day are temporary, others have lasted for decades. On the face of it because a boycott involves two parties, most boycotts should be amenable to research that determines the extent to which a particular boycott has been successful. For instance, Garrett (1987) hypothesizes that the group that a boycott will be most successful when economic and image pressure on the target corporation are high and when the commitment of the target to the policy that provoked the boycott is low. This perhaps helps explain why consumer boycotts are so often targeted against high-profile organizations. Here the effectiveness of the boycott can be measured in relation to the degree of the change to the target's disputed policies. At one extreme complete capitulation resulting from a change in policy signals absolute success while on the other, the boycott has failed where there is no change at all.

The End Loans to South-Africa (ELTSA) campaign was initiated in 1974 to stop loans by European banks to the apartheid South African regime. At one stage ELTSA established a 'shadow board' of Barclays Bank, producing an alternative annual report, picketing bank branches and distributing leaflets. On the face of it in the terms described above the boycott was successful, as Barclays ended its relations with the apartheid

⁶⁷⁸ Garrett, (1987, 46).

government in 1986. Yet the full story is more complex and involved more actors and factors than can adequately be covered here.⁶⁷⁹

Another well-known and longstanding case is the boycott of Nestlé, which was organised in 1974 after the publication of “The Baby Killer” by *War on Want*, which highlighted the harmful effects including many thousands of infant deaths, resulting from their marketing of formula milk products in Africa.⁶⁸⁰ Nestlé was not the only ‘offender’ but it was one of the largest supplier of infant formula to the Third World. A US boycott of Nestlé was instigated by *Baby Milk Action* in 1977, following an industry response that was regarded as cynical and unyielding, which quickly spread to Europe and beyond, coordinated by the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). Following a period of intense pressure, the largest manufacturers were forced to adhere to a non-binding International Code on the Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes established by the World Health Organisation. Nestlé also formed an independent commission which included some of those who had participated in the boycott. The boycott was lifted in 1984, but was reinstated in 1988, and indeed in one of the longest running boycotts, *Baby Milk Action* continues today to ask consumers to boycott Nestlé products due to its marketing of baby-food, “with misleading idealised and unsubstantiated claims”.⁶⁸¹

The next case flags up aspects of power in the context of business and marketing that are deserving of further consideration with respect to individuality and accountability. Thinking in A/b terms, consider that a large multinational takeaway food business wants to counter the negative publicity contained in a leaflet circulated by members of B, a tiny minority group based on London. The leaflet includes a list of purported abuses carried out by A and calls for a customer boycott of A's products. From Dahl, one might first enquire as to the bases of power that A and B can draw upon. A has access to virtually unlimited financial resources and the favourable opinions of its millions of loyal customers internationally. Its huge organization employs specialists in accounting, property, planning applications, legal affairs, marketing and public relations who have built good relationships with officials from local and national government. B on the other hand consists of five volunteers who spend their limited free time in campaigning but who are relatively impoverished with little resources. Given that B's leaflet was circulated to just a

⁶⁷⁹ The extensive ELTSA archive can be accessed at the following address. [https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/bf424edf-65b6-3958-9cc3cba53d93085b#:~:text=End%20Loans%20to%20Southern%20Africa%20\(ELTSA\)%20campaigned%20for%20the%20end,imposition%20of%20effective%20financial%20sanctions.](https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/bf424edf-65b6-3958-9cc3cba53d93085b#:~:text=End%20Loans%20to%20Southern%20Africa%20(ELTSA)%20campaigned%20for%20the%20end,imposition%20of%20effective%20financial%20sanctions.)

⁶⁸⁰ A paper by Anttilla-Hughes et al. (2018), estimates this caused 9.8 deaths per thousand that were otherwise preventable, resulting in 66,000 deaths in 1981, which was the peak. For background the following case is an example; The Oxford Centre for Global History (2019). Nestlé's corporate reputation and the long history of infant formula. Case study 12, Global History of Capitalism Project, *Said Business School*. <https://globalcapitalism.history.ox.ac.uk/files/case12-nestlescorporatereputationpdf-1>. See also, Sasson, (2016).

⁶⁸¹ Baby Milk Action (IBFAN-UK) Why the Nestlé boycott continues. <http://www.babymilkaction.org/nestlefree>. Accessed March 2022. See also, Changing Markets Foundation (2017) *Milking it: How milk formula companies are putting profits before science*: <https://changingmarkets.org/portfolio/milking-it/>. World Health Organization (2017) *Infant and young child feeding*: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs342/en/>. Nestlé. *Why was a Nestlé boycott launched?* <https://www.nestle.com/ask-nestle/our-company/answers/nestle-boycott>. Accessed March 2022.

few hundred people, A might simply have choose to ignore B. Alternatively, A might challenge B's narrative by commissioning paid-for advertising and a PR campaign to promote its own preferred message. A might also informally request B to stop circulating the leaflet. As a final course of action, if A thinks that the contents of B's leaflet are false, misleading or even libellous, then A might flex its financial muscles to hire the best lawyers available to threaten legal action against members of B if they do not publicly retract the claims made in the leaflet and apologize to A. Dahl argues that in such instances the amount of power A has over B can be calculated as a probability. Given A's massive resources and the scope of the means at their disposal, then a reasonable person might assign a score of 8 or 9 out of 10 for the probability that if the massive corporation A initiates legal proceedings against the five individual members of B named in the writ, these individuals will back down and apologize to A.

The “McLibel” Case

The above is a summary of events leading up to the case of McDonald's Corporation v Steel & Morris [1997], the longest trial in English legal history and better known as the 'McLibel' case. London Greenpeace (which should not be confused with Greenpeace International) was a single-issue group consisted of five members. The leaflet handed out by London Greenpeace included a number of allegations, accusing McDonald's of involvement in animal cruelty, despoilation of the environment, paying low wages and resisting unionisation. McDonald's responded by issuing members of London Greenpeace with a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation) action with the presumed aim of stopping them from circulating the leaflet whilst tying them up in complex and expensive legal proceedings. If successful, this could only have a beneficial effect on the share price.⁶⁸² In legal terms a SLAPP action can only be served on a named legal individual. Because London Greenpeace was unincorporated and thus was not recognised as a legal entity in its own right, liability devolved onto the shoulders of its five flesh and blood members, so the five individual members of London Greenpeace were served formal written notification of the action. On receipt of the papers three of the five apologised to McDonald's, leaving just two individuals, Helen Steel and David Morris to confront the other legal 'individual', the McDonald's Corporation, in court.

The Corporation as an Individual

Incongruous as it may seem, legal personhood has been granted to joint-stock companies in the UK since 1862 and in the USA since 1868. While the five flesh and blood individuals in the “McLibel” case were publicly named, no-one got to know the names of the McDonald's executives who decided to bring the action against London Greenpeace, although we do know the names of the top legal team that represented McDonald's that included Richard Rampton QC, Timothy Atkinson and Pattie Brinley-

⁶⁸² Vick & Campbell, (2001, 211-212).

Codd.⁶⁸³ The cash-strapped defendants Helen Steel and Dave Morris on the other hand generally defended themselves. Importantly legislation not only preserves the anonymity of the individuals involved in a corporation but restricts the liability of its shareholders. Effectively, this means that if a company were to fail or to cause damage, its shareholders can only be made liable for their stake in the business and not for any loss that exceeds that. This might be considered ironic given that the British test-case establishing limited liability consisted of an act of fraud where an individual was both the chief shareholder *and* the chief creditor of the business.⁶⁸⁴ Corporations since have lobbied successfully for rights to free speech and privacy, against a duty to provide public goods, and for ‘non-human’ rights such as the ability to own other corporations.

When Steel and Morris decided to defend their leaflet in court they had no idea that this would end as the longest libel case in British history. Publicity surrounding the case from mainstream news media and generated by the *McSpotlight* website and a documentary aired on Channel Four led to an upwelling of support for the pair, leading to a powerful anti-McDonald’s movement. After 313 days, the judge finally ruled that Steel and Morris had not proved a number of the allegations made in the leaflet against McDonald’s, such as alleged destruction of the rainforest, and in relation to packaging, food poisoning, starvation in the Third World, heart disease, cancer and bad working conditions for workers. Consequently, McDonald’s ultimately won their libel case, but at a price to its reputation, as the court accepted London Greenpeace’s arguments about the corporation’s use of misleading advertising, its culpability regarding cruelty to animals and its antipathy to unionisation. Steel and Morris were ordered to pay damages of £60,000 to McDonald’s which they refused to pay,⁶⁸⁵ although McDonald’s had earlier stated that it was not going to seek to enforce payment. It didn’t end there as Steel and Morris then took the case to the Court of Appeal⁶⁸⁶. The higher court confirmed most of the findings of the High Court but rejected its’ finding regarding McDonald’s health claims and reduced the damages awarded to McDonald’s by one-third.

In 2005 Steel and Morris brought a further case against the British Government to the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds that in the earlier trial their freedom of expression had been denied and they had been denied a fair trial.⁶⁸⁷ The court ruled in favour of Steel and Morris on the basis that their right to a fair trial had been impeded by the complexity and length of the procedure and that their right to right to freedom of expression had been compromised, ordering the UK government pay Steel and Morris £57,000 in compensation. This decision by the European Court that the English legal

⁶⁸³ Curiously, in the USA, the rights granted to freed slaves under the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution were extended to private corporations in 1868. In Britain legal personhood of a joint-stock company separate from its shareholders was established by the Companies Act (1862).

⁶⁸⁴ The 1862 Companies Act was ratified by the House of Lords in the judgement of the case of *Salomon vs Salomon & Co* (1897), which re-iterated the principle of limited liability (Plesch & Brankenberg, 2008, 15).

⁶⁸⁵ The McLibel Trial Judgement, *McSpotlight*. <https://www.mcspotlight.org/case/trial/verdict/index.html>

⁶⁸⁶ *Steel v. McDonald's Corpn.* (1999) QBENF 97/1281/1 (CA).

⁶⁸⁷ *HUDOC, Steel and Morris vs. The United Kingdom*, (2005).

system historically respected the protection of reputation over freedom of expression might be construed as a form of censure against the continuing use of SLAPP actions in the UK.⁶⁸⁸

A curious parallel to the above involved the unlikely alliance struck between McDonald's corporation and Greenpeace International (Yes, the *other* Greenpeace) along with several large UK supermarkets, with the aim to address one of the key issues mentioned in the McLibel leaflet, concerning damage to the Amazon rainforest. This unlikely alliance was formed as the consequence a Greenpeace three year-long investigation into Cargill, one of the largest food corporations in the world, which supplied soya products to McDonald's. Greenpeace accused Cargill of growing soya beans on recently cleared rainforest but given that Cargill maintains a very low corporate profile, Greenpeace initially decided that it would be more effective to target the more visible McDonalds, chaining two-metre chickens to outlets in seven UK cities and amplifying its message through an extensive media campaign. McDonald's eventually agreed to remove soya produced in the Amazon from its repertoire of ingredients and joined in the alliance against Cargill along with Marks and Spencer, Waitrose and Asda. Collectively they were successful in forcing Cargill into signing a two-year moratorium on buying soya from newly deforested land in the Amazon. Despite their success, Cargill has been repeatedly accused by Greenpeace of growing soya-beans on cleared rainforest.⁶⁸⁹

Overall, despite that McDonald's won damages, many of those on the Left regard the 'McLibel' case as a win against McDonald's because of the huge publicity generated from the case. So consequential was the trial that twenty-five years later some of the key players participated in *The Reunion* (BBC, 2022) and later of a BBC podcast, *Shadow World: The People vs. McDonald's*.⁶⁹⁰

Questions of Accountability

From the above, organizations such as London Greenpeace that are not joint-stock companies are not legal persons, so responsibility falls onto the shoulders of the real individual human beings who belong to them, whilst the shareholders of a corporation like McDonald's are only liable up to the total value of the shares they own. Differences extend to the risk of criminal liability of those who engage in anti-corporate activity compared with the employees of corporations. Massive fraud was a contributing factor to the catastrophic Great Financial Crash (GFC) of 2008 that caused lasting harm to the lives and prospects of billions of people. Supposedly well-run, responsible and well-regulated financial institutions went to the wall forcing governments to bail them out and to pump trillions into the world economy to forestall an economic meltdown. How many bankers

⁶⁸⁸ Vick & Campbell, (2001).

⁶⁸⁹ Sauven, J. (2006). The odd couple. *The Guardian*, 2nd August. Kirkman, A. (2020). From burned Brazilian forest to the shelves of Tesco, Asda and Lidl. *Greenpeace*, 25th November. Also, Kirkman, A. (2022). The "hidden" Amazon deforestation in UK supermarket supply chains. *Greenpeace*, 10th February.

⁶⁹⁰ BBC, (2022). The McLibel Trial, *The Reunion*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00168fp>. Also Mark Steel, (2025). *Shadow World: The People vs McDonald's*. *BBC Radio 4*, August. (seven parts).

went to jail? Forty-seven in all, the majority of twenty-five in Iceland (population 300,000), while just one person was convicted in the USA (population 340 million).⁶⁹¹

In contrast, the nature of anti-corporate activism means that protestors often end up before a criminal court of law. *Just Stop Oil* organiser Roger Hallam was given a five-year prison sentence for having protestors climb onto gantries on the M25.⁶⁹² More than 20 uniformed police, some equipped with tasers, forced their way into a Quaker Meeting House in Westminster arresting six women and confiscating their mobile phones.⁶⁹³ Activism is a game of cat and mouse where avenues for protest opened by tactical innovations of activists are closed down by legislation and rigorous enforcement. For instance, one tactic employed by Extinction Rebellion, to block busy thoroughfares such as Oxford Circus⁶⁹⁴ was criminalised by legislation that included offences pertaining to disruption of life, involving noise, static demonstrations, and one-person protests.⁶⁹⁵

Compared to citizens, employees of corporations can seemingly act with relative impunity for their actions, hiding behind the carapace of the legal person. Yet, as Crane and his co-authors note, corporations may use governments to undermine the rights of citizens by directly shaping the nature of regulation through bribes to politicians. Additionally, given their size, they “themselves” are often in the position to act as governments (Crane et al., 2008, 76).

Bases of Power in ‘McLibel’

What bases of power might have figured in the McLibel case? Expressed in A/b terms, London Greenpeace (A) sought to prevent McDonald’s from doing what it wanted to do by drawing attention to the alleged environmental harm caused by the corporation and thus to disrupt McDonald’s operations. McDonald’s massive size, organization and command of legal and other resources enabled it to apply condign power well beyond the resources available to London Greenpeace. Because London Greenpeace was not incorporated, McDonald’s had to take action against named individuals. The corporation hired seven individuals from private investigation agencies to infiltrate the group. In the process of gathering information these infiltrators engaged fully in group activities to the extent that it was reported that as many spies as activists attended meeting, one of

⁶⁹¹ Eleven were convicted in Spain, seven in Ireland and one person each in Cyprus, Germany, Italy and the USA. Noonan, Laura, Cale Tilford, Richard Milne, Ian Mount and Peter Wise (2018). Who went to jail for their role in the financial crisis? *Financial Times*, 20th September.

⁶⁹² Hallam’s sentence was reduced to four years on appeal and Daniel Shaw, Louise Lancaster, Lucia Whittaker De Abreu and Cressida Gethin were also subsequently reduced. (Gayle, D. (2025). Just Stop Oil protesters’ jail sentences shortened after appeal. *The Guardian*, 7th March).

⁶⁹³ Vernon, H. (2025). Met raids Quaker meeting house and arrests six women at Youth Demand talk. *The Guardian*, 29th March.

⁶⁹⁴ Gayle, D. (2021). Extinction Rebellion protestors block Oxford Circus in London. *The Guardian*, 25th August.

⁶⁹⁵ These are covered under the Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts (“Policing”) Act which came into effect in April 2022.

whom had a love affair with an activist.⁶⁹⁶ Additionally, the corporation sought to build on the loyalty of its customers by compiling a set of “McFacts” cards to promote its side of the story.⁶⁹⁷

By comparison, the scant resources of Steel and Morris offered little, if any, prospect of remuneration to McDonald’s for the very substantial costs involved in hiring an expensive team of lawyers. The outcome of the McLibel trial was complex, as although McDonald’s won their legal case in court, theirs was a pyrrhic victory which was arguably lost to an extent in the court of public opinion through some reputational damage. However, in the medium term, there was no sign that McDonald’s operations or share price were affected.

Discussion

By this stage you may rightly be critical of the simple model shown earlier in Figure 6.1, as it fails to account for several aspects of the McLibel case. For one thing the members of London Greenpeace were not customers of McDonald’s nor were they consumers of their products, but social activists. Legally “London Greenpeace” does not fit with Dahl’s prescription, as it had no substance as a definitive “A” for McDonald’s to litigate against as the case had to be brought against two individuals, Steel and Morris. Nor does it capture important emergent aspects of the case, which unfolded dynamically involving new actors, the formation of a network of alliances and the adoption of counter-strategies. Although McDonald’s presented the same monolithic face to the world throughout, and although Steel and Morris were also constantly in the foreground, the emergent actions of those who energised the campaign included collaborations between a multiplicity of actors that spilled out well beyond main protagonists both nationally and abroad. Finally, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, there are gaps involving questions of “known-unknowns” and “unknown unknowns”. For instance, unknown to several members of London Greenpeace was that at the outset they had no idea that their small group had been closely monitored by private investigators and penetrated by the police.

The above raises important questions for the study of power in the context of business and marketing. Crane et al. (2008: 76) rather bluntly, and perhaps wisely, warn researchers off from attempting to study power relations between business and government as far too complex to follow because the process would involve tracing the actual influence of corporations on political actors and then determining whether or not a certain decision was solely or largely the result of corporate influence. Their observations point up the major difficulty of gaining research access to the inner workings or deliberations of those who work for corporations, never mind those between government and corporations. That said, while relations between government, corporate interests and activists are often complex and opaque, this should not entail that academics abrogate their responsibility by ruling out empirical research *tout-court*. Dahl was concerned by the paucity of empirical research on the important question of the power of business, which unfortunately remains the case today in relation to marketing and consumer

⁶⁹⁶ The McLibel Trial Story, *McSpotlight*. <https://www.mcspotlight.org/case/trial/story.html>

⁶⁹⁷ See above footnote. This was in 1989 as the anti-McDonald’s campaign gathered impetus.

research. Crane et al's (2008) arguments could apply to any attempt to research the inner-workings of a corporation or its engagement with any of its stakeholders. While the difficulties are real enough, it can be argued that these ought to be balanced against the importance of the issues involved which are vital to democracy, such as research into the corporate capture of government.

The difficulties should not be under-estimated. Corporations have means to fund the campaigns of politicians, much of it covert, to hire professional lobbyists, and to avail of the "revolving door" where regulators move seamlessly into the higher echelons of business, which taken together pose a threat to democratic functioning. Millions of pounds are provided annually to fund UK university programmes into research on tobacco and alcohol and obesity which can bring those working in these areas directly into conflict with the profit-driven aim of these industries, which has unsurprisingly resulted in litigation.⁶⁹⁸ While it is creditable that research institutes have been developed "at scale" to investigate vexing questions pertaining to obesity and addiction, given its importance, one might imagine that there ought to be something similar devoted to the study of power relations in business and marketing. This is of course a huge area ranging from the daily frustrations experienced by customers and consumer ailments to the strategies engaged in by social and corporate activists and more complex relations in the international sphere.

Beyond Dahl: Social Movement Theory

While Dahl's prescription may be suitable for relatively simple static and clear-cut instances of power where a defined "A" is observed to exercise power over a "B", when for example a Ryanair attendant informs a hapless passenger that they must pay to have their baggage put in the hold, it does not get to grips with complex cases where "As" and "Bs" can be difficult to define and change their identities in the course of a complex and shifting process. The multiform nature of the McLibel case seems to better fit the description of a social movement, defined as a network 'of informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity' (Diani, 1992).

There are resonances here with resource mobilization theory and political process theory where power relations are envisaged as nested within wider social relations such that a contest at one level is embedded in a larger system where different actors, issues and dynamics may come into play that may or may not have a bearing on the outcome at the lower level; conflicts on the same issue can arise at different levels and involve different "rules of the game".⁶⁹⁹ As illustrated in Figure 6.2 below, the case of McDonald's and London Greenpeace was transformed when it was elevated into a contest between London Greenpeace and the UK Government at the supranational level of the Court of

⁶⁹⁸ See for instance the case brought by Philip Morris against the University of Stirling. Dunnion, K. (2011). *Decision 129/2011 Philip Morris International and the University of Stirling*, 30th June. Scottish Information Commission. For more insight see Carrell, S., (2011). Tobacco firm demands university's research into children and smoking. *The Guardian*, 1st September.

⁶⁹⁹ See Davis et al. (2005), especially the four chapters in section 2.

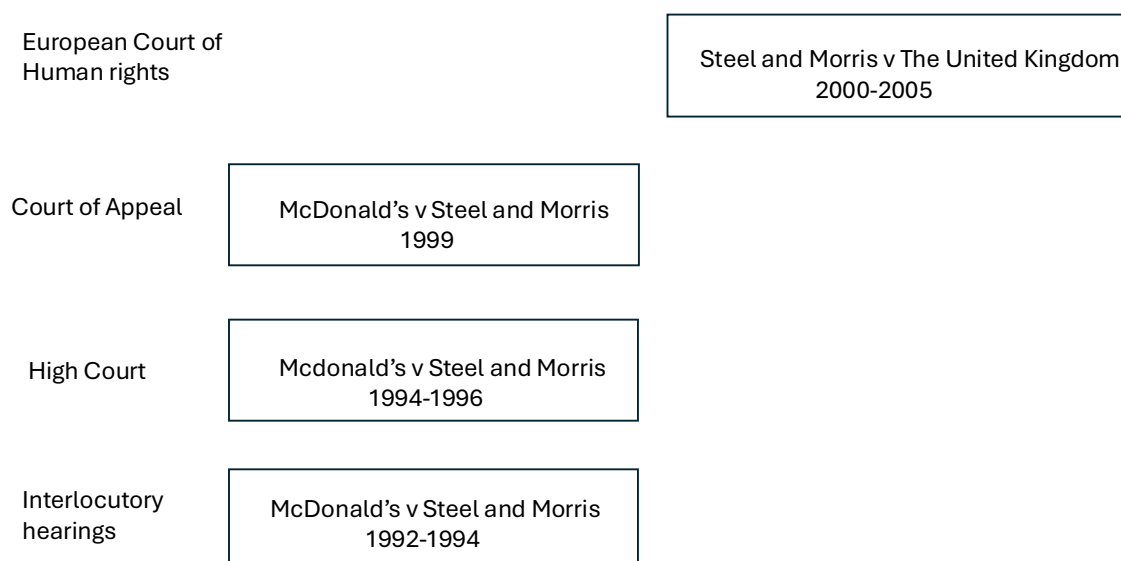


Figure 6.2. Levels of Action in 'McLibel' Cases

Human Rights. There are also overlaps at the horizontal level, concerning whether or not the legal actions involving London Greenpeace had any effect on the concurrent direct-action campaign against McDonalds initiated by Greenpeace International against McDonald's.

Actions such as that between McDonald's and London Greenpeace can involve issues that concern social movement activists on a spectrum from left to right in relation to issues such as workers' rights, identity politics, child labour, environmental destruction and animal cruelty, which can spill well beyond the bounds of the formal political system. as envisaged by Dahl. McAdam (1999) criticised Dahl's (1967, 23) contention that because of its diversity, the pluralist system ought to offer sufficient scope for all citizens to participate in formal politics. As Dahl saw it any group that feels that its interests might be compromised or harmed by a particular policy has the opportunity to press its case by working cooperatively with others to delay or even to prevent its implementation.

McAdam (1992) asks why, if Dahl's pluralist account is accurate, do social movements exist outside and beyond the limits of the formal system? McAdam contends that pluralist theory had exerted such a grip on the academy that up until the 1980s, social movements were generally thought to be made up of marginalised, alienated and irrational misfits and consequently that, "a tidy scholarly division of labor emerged; with pluralists explaining the workings of institutional politics and social movements...left to "the social psychologist whose intellectual tools prepare him to better understand the irrational.' ⁷⁰⁰ Informed by this understanding, rather than looking at McLibel as a form of resistance to corporate power, academics might instead have restricted their remit to

⁷⁰⁰ McAdam, (1999, 6).

probe into the supposedly irrational psychology of Helen Steel and David Morris to discover the conditions that led to their involvement. McAdam explains that this narrow a-political understanding of social movements undermined scholarly faith in pluralism and became untenable in the 1960s.

Studying Contentious Politics

At this point I should mention that there are various social movement theories which from the 1970s coalesced into two relatively distinct groupings. In Europe, New Social Movement (NSM) theory focuses mainly on the construction of identity by social actors (Touraine, 1985), whilst Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which developed in the USA, (Della Porta & Diani, 1999) focuses more on the creation of “social movement industries”⁷⁰¹ and on the human, material, technical and organizational resources that movements deploy to gain access to the system of formal politics. Thus, Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Varman (2021) employed NSM theory to inform their study of the perseverance of solidarity in maintaining the resilience social movements in Athens, Greece, following in the period following the Great Financial Crash. The following discussion is based largely on political process theory (McAdam, 1982) and especially on ‘Contentious Politics’ (McAdam et al., 2001) which aims to develop a synthetic account that incorporate the concerns of NSM theorists into RMT theory.⁷⁰²

McAdam et al. (2001) ask similarly broad questions to those posed by Dahl, although they are more concerned to discover processes than outcomes. While informed by a similarly mechanistic ethos, as sociologists influenced by the structural-functionalist tradition of Robert Merton, their approach to the study of power is quite different to that of Dahl. In relation to ontology, they differ from Dahl, who takes the individual mind as the basic site of social reality to focus on the deliberate choices made by individuals or by collectives considered as individuals, to argue that social transactions are irreducible to individual mental events. Consequently, theorists are not so interested as was Dahl, to discover rationalist accounts of crucial decisions, but rather relational interactions between social sites. Identity is not considered by them as immutable, but rather as modified and shaped in interaction so that when making a claim identity is mobilized and deployed strategically through constant manipulation and modification. Epistemologically, the aim is to identify causal chains, ‘that consist of mechanisms that reappear in a variety of settings but in different sequences and combinations.’ Rather than trying to develop all-encompassing laws to explain complex events such as revolutions and social movements, they acknowledge that no truly general account is attainable, adopting an approach similar to that of the molecular biologist by breaking events down into smaller episodes and then seeking to identify recurrent mechanisms and processes within them (McAdam et al. 2001).

⁷⁰¹ Edelman, (2001, 289).

⁷⁰² Edelman describes how RMT came under fire from NSM theorists for lacking attention to discourse and identity formation and the response by McAdam et al., (2001) by including ‘political opportunities’, ‘mobilizing structures’ and ‘framing’ to include how collective identities arise and the interpretive and discursive practices and performances that shape the understandings of participants. (Edelman, 2001, 291).

Where Dahl speaks of bases of power, resource mobilization theory seeks to explain enabling factors that build the capacity for group action through funding, manpower and non-material resources (Jenkins, 1983). In terms of its rigour, research into contentious politics matches the exacting and detailed standards one might expect from Dahl. For instance, McAdam et al (2005) wanted to know if the social ecology of protest activity had changed between 1970 and 2000? They particularly wanted to know if protest had been motivated by international, national or local concern and additionally, whether particular neighbourhoods were more likely to initiate protest events? The overall approach is broadly similar to that employed by Dahl in the New Haven study in (a) selecting a “typical” city as the focus for study, (b) defining terms for coding and analysis (c) collecting data on the population, or on a sample of relevant events (d) coding, analysis and (e) reporting. From a relatively small amount of data gathered on thousands of events the authors) were able to tell a story that was quite different to the “stylized” version conveyed by the literature on social movements. For instance, their analysis indicated a distinctive shift over time in the typical protestor, who changed over the period from being an Africa-American member of a disadvantaged city-centre minority to being a white suburbanite.

In the context of McLibel it is useful to note that event analysis is not only used by social movement researchers but also in financial economics where it is used to identify the effects on a share price of publicly revealing events that are relevant to a firm’s value such as firing a CEO.⁷⁰³ Vick and Campbell (2001) focused on the events surrounding the McLibel case to ask if the protests or subsequent publicity had a temporary or lasting effect on the corporation’s share price, concluding that the only event that had a negative impact was the Channel Four documentary that aired on 17th-18th May 1997. Although there was a downturn in McDonald’s share price this was not sustained,⁷⁰⁴ and indeed over the period of study, McDonald’s stock outperformed the Standard and Poors index.⁷⁰⁵ The authors offer two reasons for this outcome; that the corporation’s “omnipresent” advertising campaign of “feel-good” messages may have drowned out the negative aspects; and because the product appeal was principally to children and young people who are likely to be less influenced than older consumers by such campaigns.

An additional benefit of adopting political process theory to studying power in marketing is the availability of a lexicon by which to describe processes involved in contentious politics which can allow for cross-comparison of cases. For instance, the McLibel case can be seen to involve a number of episodes which are not given but are rather defined by the individuals involved. Some mechanisms were cognitive, as in the reluctance expressed by some members of London Greenpeace to engage in the legal process. Brokerage was a crucial mechanism when a lawyer acquaintance of Steel and Morris mentioned a “friend who owed him a favour”, who turned out to be the barrister Keir Starmer who agreed to provide *pro bono* advice to the pair. Certification is an important

⁷⁰³ Davis and Thompson, (1994, 161).

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., 232.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., Table 2, 233.

process which involves external recognition of the validity of claims and of performances made by individuals. Certification was vital if Steel and Morris were to win their case, as their performances and claims needed to be convincing to those in external authority. The mobilization of identity thus played an important role in making claims. The case also involved co-optation in that previously excluded actors were incorporated into the site of power. Finally, how issues were framed by the different actors played an important role.

While the development of a common lexicon is most useful as it enables the cross-comparison of many cases, political process theory developed by McAdam (1982) is one of a number of explanations for the development and growth of movements that develop outside the system of formal politics, which highlights the role of political and institutional factors in shaping social movements. McAdam hypothesised that social movements tend to emerge and have a better chance of sustaining themselves and exerting influence when the overall configuration of institutional power is broadly receptive to their interests. Because social movements occupy spaces that are outside the tent of institutional politics, their representatives (supposing that they have some) have no standing, nor any familiarity with the workings of the system. However, the formal political status quo is not immutable and can be upset through war, economic crises, regime change and major demographic shifts, providing openings for social movements to exert influence.

McAdam argues that when such opportunities open, social movements need to have mobilizing structures in place as a basis to continue sustained action. Finally, cultural factors and shared meaning as playing a vital role in mobilizing support, particularly in relation to how an issue is framed. At a minimum, people need to feel both aggrieved about (or threatened by) some aspect of their lives and also optimistic that by acting collectively they can begin to redress the problem. For Davis and Thompson (1994) while people are often discontented, most will only act on their grievances when stimulated to do so by an issue entrepreneur.⁷⁰⁶ Moreover formal organizations are also critical if social movements are to engage in the formation of government policy as this, “is in effect the price of admission to the polity”. They also argue for a multilevel approach by recognising that distributive conflicts that result in concrete outcomes at one level are linked to definitional conflicts at a higher level concerning the “rules of the game” that enable or restrict the scope of action at the lower level.

Changes in the Institutional Context

Davis and Thompson (1994) argue that definitional conflicts played an important role in the growth of the shareholder rights movement in the USA during the early 1990s. The background to this pertains to a conflict of interest between shareholders, who favour takeovers because they are offered a premium for their shares, whilst executives will resist takeovers because of the threat these pose to their tenure. Until the 1980s managers had successfully dominated shareholders by restricting takeovers. However that changed under the regime of Ronald Reagan, who subscribed to the Chicago School doctrine of efficient markets and the political climate swung more in favour of shareholders. Reagan’s regime was so benign to corporate interests that the

⁷⁰⁶ For more about issue entrepreneurs Davis and Thompson reference McCarthy & Zald, 1977, (1215).

administration did not act even after thirty percent of the Fortune 500 companies became subjected to a hostile takeover.⁷⁰⁷ Following the logic outlined by McAdam (1982) of the importance of the political climate, the authors argue that this inspired an “insurgent consciousness” amongst shareholders to act. Although executive pay was not the only issue that concerned them, ‘runaway’ executive pay had received a lot of publicity and formed a clear and popular issue for rights activists to focus on. Activists lobbied state and federal authorities, attended Congressional hearings and sponsored legislation to restrict executive pay, framing this as a governance issue linked to the overall accountability of the firm to its shareholders.⁷⁰⁸ The authors conclude that the results of the campaign were “impressive” in definitional terms by changing the rules of the game, enabling shareholders to take concrete action to rein in executive power in a number of ways including gaining the right to vote in cases of “golden parachutes” and to play an advisory role in executive pay.⁷⁰⁹

The Power of Platforms

In the global arena today there is increasing competition between hardening blocs surrounding the interests of China and the USA which are competing partly through the construction of rival global platforms and artificial intelligence systems. As each bloc develops its own systems so pressure is applied to ensure that members of client states make the “correct” decisions.

“Platform’ derives its name from the auto-industry where different models can be built on the same frame or platform.⁷¹⁰ Applied to software, Intel, Nvidia Cisco, Microsoft and Apple, have all become leaders on the basis of the power of their operating systems known as ‘transaction’ platforms (Cusumano et al. 2019). From the mid-1990s US-based platforms grew rapidly to dominate many overseas markets through a mixture of “organic” growth and acquisition. Regulation is now an important concern given that the growth of these virtual monopolies was partly a consequence of benign “light-touch” regulation by foreign governments which failed to spot their growing power. State administrators in Europe and elsewhere have slowly woken up to the power of global platforms whose algorithms are designed to maximise user engagement by amplifying content including misinformation that shocks and stirs the emotions, resulting in harm to vulnerable individuals, whilst monetising the valuable “data exhaust” obtained from surveillance.⁷¹¹ The Trump-47 regime is currently applying enormous pressure on these countries that the US has traditionally considered in its “back yard” to drop taxes and ease regulation of these platforms. For instance, in one of many moves the president described the EU Digital Markets Act designed to regulate competition in the sector as

⁷⁰⁷ Davis & Thompson, (1994, 158)

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 168.

⁷¹⁰ Garcia, (2025).

⁷¹¹ “Data exhaust” is a term used by Zuboff, (2019).

“overseas extortion” of American companies and has threatened to impose further tariffs on the bloc.⁷¹²

While discussion of the regulation of ‘Big Tech’ is almost exclusively held at the level of governments and transnational institutions, these discussions and outcomes such as the regulation (or lack of it), that follows, can have a direct effect on the lives of billions of users. But what of the situation where the institutional context is so fragile that a very specific demand for cheaper public transport escalates to the very top of the state and brings down the government? This is discussed below in relation to the case of Movimento Pass Livre.

Movimento Passe Livre (MPL)

The campaign by Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) for free transport in Sao Paul ostensibly succeeded in its original aim, but provoked a backlash, that then unleashed a political storm which shook the entire country. In June 2013 the city administration of Sao Paulo announced that as inflation was running at over 15%, transport tickets would be increased from 3 reais (£0.90) to 3.2 reais (0.96). This prompted a group of young firebrand activists to name themselves the Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) around which to organize a protest, not just against the fare rise, but to demand free public transport for all.

The young radicals who joined the MPL were idealists who put their belief in flat organization into practice. To begin with the campaign did not enlist widespread support as their tactics, which included street protests and burning barricades, were reported on negatively by the mainstream media. However, when social media relayed real-time imagery of the heavy-handed response by police, this mobilised many thousands of outraged citizens from different backgrounds to join the protests, with almost one million people taking to the streets. Weeks later the mood of the huge crowd was electric and euphoric when news spread that the city officials had announced an end to the fare increase.

While the above suggests a happy ending for the MPL, unfortunately for them, it did not end there. In *How We Burn*, Vincent Bevins (2024) describes how, as other groups were drawn into the protest, so did the list of grievances. What started out as a simple protest against increased bus fares morphed into a campaign against systemic corruption. Responding to the wave of unrest Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff brought in laws to tackle systemic corruption. The subsequent investigation named Lava Jato (Operation Carwash), unravelled a massive web of corruption involving Petrobras, the state oil company, industry executives and politicians. As the true extent of corruption began to be revealed so public anger turned onto politicians, particularly on ex-President Lula and current President Rousseff, who were both from the Workers Party. The right-wing media, “trumpeted the message that the dirty socialists in Brasilia” were entirely responsible for the corruption, whereas Bevins explains the reality, that corruption was so

⁷¹² Parry, J. (2025). EU risks more Trump tariffs in looming Big Tech crackdown. *Politico*, 19th March.

endemic that every party was involved and additionally, that Rousseff had actually initiated the action that enabled the anti-corruption investigation.

To cut a long and complex story short, in 2015, one of Brazil's most corrupt politicians sought to have Rousseff impeached, "in an attempt to stop or divert Car Wash". She was accused of shifting government funds between accounts to make the state finances look better than they were. Although dubious, this had been a common practice, but as Bevins says, this was just a pretext, and the real point of the impeachment was to strike back at Rousseff over the Carwash investigation. Rousseff was eventually impeached and Michael Temer, her replacement as President, who was himself deeply mired in accusations of corruption, promptly capped public spending and removed protections for the Amazon Rainforest.

Bevins summarises that when looked at in the round, MPL is an example of a familiar story where bottom-up protests by idealists is turned round to serve the ends of the forces of reaction. Subsequently, members of the MPL lamented their lack of an overall strategy and of the political nous to achieve it. From the perspective of political process theory (McAdam, 1982), while the opportunity for change was initially dampened through negative reports circulated by the mainstream media, this was invigorated by widespread social media reports of police violence. However, once the initial limited aim of the campaign had succeeded, given splits between different groups and interests the new goal of 'anti-corruption' proved to be the lowest common denominator to mobilise joint action. This led in quick succession to the Lava Jato investigation, the removal of Rousseff on a pretext and her replacement with Temer, then Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

However, given the complexity of the case and the number of levels involved it is important to recognize the existence of "known-unknowns" and 'unknown-unknowns' about this case. Known-unknowns for instance concern the bitter infighting behind groups in Brazil behind the scenes and the level of influence exerted by foreign governments. The former is evidenced by the subsequent arrest of Temer on charges of corruption in 2019, and then of Bolsonaro, who was sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison for plotting a military coup that was widely seen as a copycat action to that instigated by Donald Trump on 6th January of that year.⁷¹³ Trump has since imposed huge tariffs on Brazil as retaliation for the arrest of his "friend" Bolsanaro.⁷¹⁴

⁷¹³ BBC News, (2019). *Michel Temer: Brazil ex-president arrested in corruption probe*, 21st March.

Wells, I. & V. Buschschlüter (2025). Bolsonaro sentenced to 27 years in prison for plotting Brazil coup, *BBC News*, 11th September.

⁷¹⁴ Iqbal, N. & L. Prazeres (2025). Bolsonaro's son praises Trump's tariff hike on Brazil. *BBC News*, 14th August.

Section Three: The International Context

Media “Stings”

“‘When I was fired, I cried for two weeks’, how interventions went wrong in Morocco’s garment industry’ (Bourdillion et al., 2013). The title of this contribution to an edited collection on child labour makes plain the authors’ argument that naïve Western interventions made on the basis of ethnocentric values into countries such as Morocco, can have negative and even perverse consequences for the children involved. The authors borrow the quotation from the study published by Fatima Zalami and her colleagues (Zalami, 1998) who followed up what happened to the child workers who were summarily dismissed from the Sicome factory in Méknès, Morocco in the wake of the *World in Action* programme, *St Michael: Has The Halo Slipped?*, broadcast in January 1996. Bourdillion et al. argue that in December 1995 following a ‘quick visit’ from M&S staff in advance of the broadcast, many of the children were summarily dismissed by their employer, so that when the *World in Action* programme aired in January 1996, Marks and Spencer could argue that no young person under the age of fifteen was employed there. It should be noted against this accusation of cynical disregard that Marks & Spencer did not make this statement, but rather said that, ‘it had never knowingly sourced garments made using child labour and denied that other incorrectly labelled clothing could be available in M&S stores’ (Independent, 1996). Additionally, in March that year Marks and Spencer won significant libel damages from Granada Television following a similar allegation.

That the supplier to Marks and Spencer repudiated the existence of child labour is perhaps understandable given that Amal, whose quote opens this paragraph, told Zalami that when British buyers visited the plant the children were told to hide. Hobbs et al. (1999) who also discuss the Méknès case, make it clear that Granada Television withdrew this claim and paid compensation to Marks and Spencer (ibid., 156). Zalami et al. 1998 found that that girls aged 12-15 were employed in the factory at Méknès, quite legally as it turned out, as some were official apprentices under Moroccan law. Amal worked among one hundred other apprentices in the factory at Sicome, all of whom had reached the legal minimum age for apprenticeship in Morocco and the age for employment in light work in developing countries permitted by the ILO Minimum Age convention (no. 138 of 1973). However, the girls received little, if any training, worked long hours and were never paid overtime. In her interview with Zalami and her colleagues Amal says that following the *World in Action* exposé, Shadia, one of the company accountants asked her to sign some papers which she later realized contained her resignation, and was paid ninety dollars severance. Amal said that she had wanted to go to school but had no money to buy books and so the factory job offered the only alternative. Now it is too late for her to do so and she needs to work in order to help her family. Following their dismissal from the factory some girls stayed at home and made buttons; a trade that is poorly paid and damaging to eyesight. It was reported also that at least one girl became involved in prostitution.

Zalami's report argues that neither the TV team nor Marks & Spencer took any interest in the employment context in Morocco, nor did they speak to, or take into account the girls' own preferences. From their own point of view the girls had been knocked off their foothold into a desirable job opportunity and were now desperate to find alternative work. The TV team did not appear interested to investigate the context of life and work in Morocco and appeared more concerned to appeal to the moral outrage of UK viewers. The retailer too seemed more concerned with maintaining its profit base than in dealing with the plight of the children. They could have used their power to mitigate working conditions inside the factory, to ensure that the employers properly comply with government apprenticeship regulation that were supposed to protect teenagers. From the above, the *World in Action* team could have done a better job by checking their facts in advance of airing the 'fly on the wall' documentary.

Child Labour in Bangladesh

My reasons for including the following lengthy case are fourfold. Firstly, the accounts discussed so far imply that all of the relevant factors about a situation can be identified. In the case of Marks and Spencer in Morocco, academics were quick to call out mistakes made by the *World in Action* programme, but what if the detailed accounts by academics themselves differ in important respects, as is in the following case which is about child labour in Bangladesh? My attempt at a potential solution described below, is to engage in fact-checking and a form of dialectical argument. Secondly, the case affords an opportunity to discuss the application of social movement theory, as one of the explanations developed by Shereen Hertel (2006), is that the focus on child labour came about as the result of what she calls a "failed boomerang". A third reason is that like that of the *Movimento Passe Livre* (MPL), the case of child labour in Bangladesh illustrates the importance of recognizing that there are unknowns, especially pertaining to the role played by government and 'northern' corporations. Finally, the case is of particular interest to me as I travelled to Bangladesh and interviewed some of the key actors involved.

The format used above by *World in Action* was virtually identical to the 'sting' relayed by the US broadcaster NBC in their *Dateline* segment to millions of viewers on 22nd of December 1992. The ostensible target of the programme was Wal-Mart's "Buy American" campaign that had been initially launched by founder Sam Walton back in 1985, at a time of increasing unemployment. The NBC sting aimed to reveal Wal-Mart's hypocrisy to millions of consumers by using hidden cameras to show footage of goods marketed under the "Made in America" promotion being manufactured in Bangladesh. The intent to highlight Wal-Mart's hypocrisy was overshadowed by footage that one might have thought was even more damaging, as it showed children as young as nine involved in the production process.

Two and half years after *Dateline* aired, the first of two Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) was signed in Bangladesh on the 4th July 1995. A broad timetable of events that unfolded in the intervening period is shown in the event chart in Table One in the appendix to this chapter may be of help, as the case of child labour in Bangladesh is one

of the most complex, if not *the* most complex in the transnational context of power, presenting a formidable challenge to those who have chosen to research it. The MoU was regarded as significant because it was the first of its kind to involve an entire industry. It consisted of four phases; firstly an initial fact-finding survey to identify child workers; secondly, an education programme coordinated by UNICEF, local NGOs and the government of Bangladesh; third, income maintenance as compensation to children for lost income; and finally, monitoring and verification by the ILO.

By the time of *NBC Dateline*, the ready-made-garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh had grown rapidly from almost nothing in 1980 to account for around 70% of Bangladeshi exports in 1992 employing 750,000 workers, most of them female, in about 1,500 factories.⁷¹⁵ Working in factories was considered as an attractive prospect for girls as it offered them the prospect of a degree of personal independence. During my visit to Bangladesh in 2004 Rosaline Costa told me that while there were virtually no child labourers wandering the streets of Dhaka in the early 1980s, this had become strikingly visible by the end of that decade.

Figure 6.3 shows some of the organizations involved in events leading up to the roughly

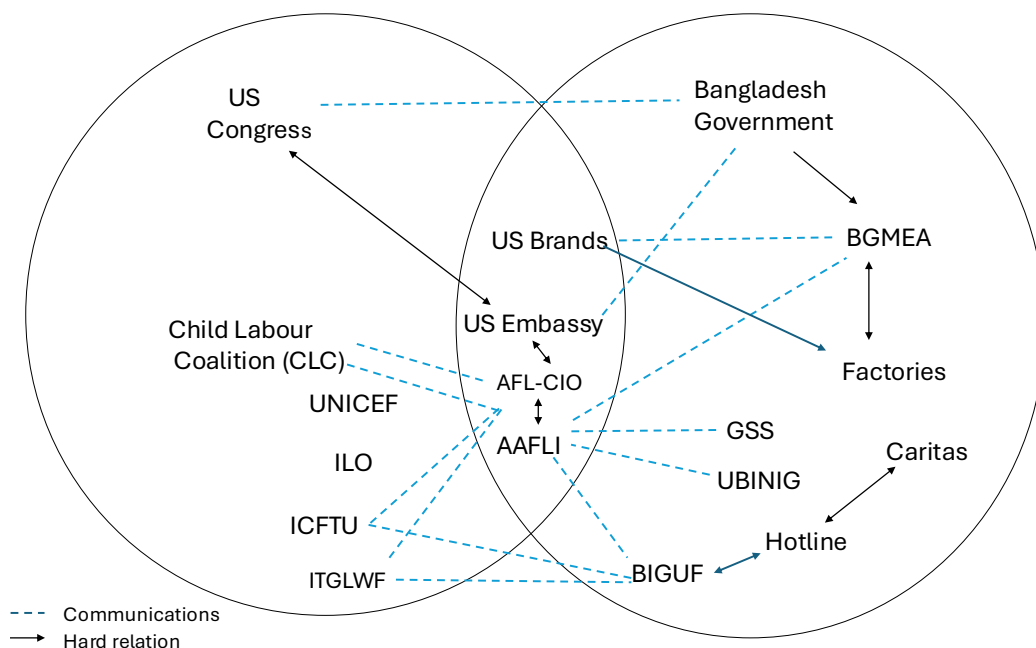


Figure 6.3. Some organizational links in run-up to Bangladesh MoU:1993-1995

two and a half years from the *NBC Dateline* broadcast to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1995. These included; the Bangladesh Garment

⁷¹⁵ UNICEF/ILO (2004, 5). In relation to Bangladesh quoted statistics should be treated with some caution as estimates can vary widely.

Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA); international brands such as Wal-Mart and Levi-Strauss; US and Bangladeshi government and quasi-governmental agencies; international agencies such as UNICEF, and the ILO; international development agencies such as Save the Children; the US Child Labor Coalition (CLC)⁷¹⁶, local NGOs, such as UBINIG, Hotline and Gonoshahajjo Sangstha (GSS); the human rights forum Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK); US union organizations such as the AFL-CIO, the AAFLI, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and The International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF); and local unions such as BIGU founded by women garment workers. The Figure illustrates something of the complexity of the organizational context. The dotted lines describe some communication links involved between actors, notably between Terry Collingsworth of the AAFLI, (who since played a pivotal role in lawsuits against Chiquita Bananas, Nestle and Shell), who had close links with Pharis Harvey of the Child Labour Coalition and in 1994 helped to establish BIGU, the first female run garment workers union along with Rosaline Costa of Hotline Bangladesh together with former child labourers Nazma Sheikh, Kalpona Akter and Babul Akter who later formed the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU). Other prominent voices were members of prominent NGOs, including, Mazhar and Farida Akter of UBINIG, and Nur Liton from ASK.

To borrow a phrase from Donald Rumsfeld, discussions between government and business interests and between the corporations that played a pivotal role in the MoU were largely shrouded in secrecy, constituting “known unknowns”. In light of this subsequent authors on this period have based their research on interview data, while others have drawn on information revealed in litigation, from testimony to government or have drawn on all three sources.

In trying to make sense of this case I selected three accounts of the series of events leading from the *NBC Dateline* broadcast to the signing of the MoU, by Ethel Brooks, (2006), Michael Nielsen, (2005) and Shareen Hertel (2007). I constructed an event chart (shown in table one in the Appendix) based to the best of my knowledge on verifiable sources and where possible, compared the events related by the authors with those on the chart. Next, I read the authors’ conflicting accounts against each other in relation to two questions; firstly in relation to the claim that the focus on child labour was a protectionist ploy by sectional interests in the USA; and secondly, whether the case is illustrative of a social movement “boomerang strategy” that went awry.

The MoU: A Price Worth Paying?

Given that there is no prospect of attaining an Archimedean point from which to survey the whole and come to a definitive conclusion about this case, a number of differing interpretations have emerged, some of them better than others. Can one reduce this complexity from a “Dahlian” perspective to ask if some ‘A’ succeeded in achieving its aims over a ‘B’? This depends on whom one decides ‘A’ and ‘B’ are. Taking a crude perspective that distils ‘A’ from US interests, and ‘B’, from Bangladeshi interests, it could be argued that ‘A’ prevailed over ‘B’ largely through economic coercion, but at a severe

⁷¹⁶ The CLC represented twenty-two organisations at the time.

cost to many involved. Coercion involved the introduction of the Child Labor Deterrence act to the Senate by Senator Harkin in October 1992⁷¹⁷ and its re-presentation in 1993 and 1994, coupled with the airing of the NBC *NBC Dateline* programme on the 22nd December, followed by two and a half years of intense wrangling and brinkmanship and culminating in the US consumer boycott of Bangladeshi goods in the month before the signature of the MoU.

According to the ILO, by the end of 2001, 8,509 children had been enrolled in 336 MOU schools. The price was high for many involved. In the interim between *Dateline* and the signing of the MoU between forty and fifty thousand children were reported to have been dismissed from their jobs with no compensation nor any offer of schooling. The consequences were also severe for Rosaline Costa of Hotline Bangladesh who had helped organize the *Dateline* segment, who was cut adrift from her organization for a time and whose life was subsequently threatened, and for her mentor Richard Timm who had to leave Bangladesh and was only allowed to return seven years later.⁷¹⁸

A key question asked by critics is why the situation of workers in Bangladesh was narrowed to child labour as opposed to the general health and wellbeing of all of those who worked in the industry. Brooks (2006) and Hertel (2007) argue that at least in part this was driven by a US protectionist agenda whilst Nielsen argues against this claim. This is discussed next.

Was the focus on child labour a protectionist ploy?

The case for the motion

An argument that gained a lot of traction in Bangladesh following *NBC Dateline* was that the focus on children's rights provided a smokescreen for US protectionist interests whose aim was to repatriate manufacturing jobs to the USA. Advocates for this view point to the introduction of the Child Labor Deterrence Act or the "Harkin Bill", named after the senator who presented it to Congress. If passed into law, the Harkin Bill would have prohibited the importation of manufactured and mined goods into the USA produced by children under the age of fifteen. While the Bill had global application, it was widely argued in Bangladesh that it was no coincidence that the Bill was re-introduced to the US Senate in October 1992, a couple of months before the *NBC Dateline* broadcast. They might also argue that American politicians actually cared little for children's rights and that they did so only because they were indebted to the unions for funding and electoral support. Moreover, they could also point to the pivotal role played in the process by Terry Collingsworth of the American Asian Free Labour Institute (AAFLI) who at the time was based in the US embassy in Dhaka. The AAFLI was part of the AFL-CIO, the largest

⁷¹⁷ Pease, Donald J. (1992). "H.R.6090 - 102nd Congress (1991-1992): Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1992." Congress.gov, (October 6, 1992). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/6090/text?s=1&r=1>.

⁷¹⁸ Brooks (2006) argues that the levels of deprivation, violence and trauma in Bangladesh are novel and shocking to westerners and that the reality of the experience of this is covered over by the testimony that individuals are expected and at least to an extent schooled to give time and time again to politicians, funders and researchers distancing them from the actuality.

union federation in the USA, and Collingsworth was at the time involved in establishing labour unions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh.⁷¹⁹

Ethel Brooks (2007) argues that child labour was constructed as a specific issue as opposed to general workers' rights because it had wide appeal and was sure to gain the attention of western consumers. In her account the particular focus on child labour in the USA formed part of a protectionist agenda against the backdrop of a sharp decline in US manufacturing, which prompted Senator Harkin to propose the Child Labor Deterrence Bill in 1992, which if passed, would have had the effect of banning all imports of products made by children into the USA. To support her argument Brooks argues that the child labour campaign was motivated primarily by US protectionist interests. She makes two broad claims to support her argument, firstly that the *NBC Dateline* television segment that aired to millions of US consumers, which she mistakenly dates to 1993 that contained 'fly on the wall' footage of children employed in the manufacture of clothing for sale by Wal-Mart was no coincidence. Secondly, she links this to the call by the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI), a wing of the US labour movement together with forty NGOs under the wing of the Child Labor Coalition called for a boycott of Bangladeshi goods.

Brooks contrasts the corporate responses of Wal-Mart and Levi-Strauss, describing how the latter had earlier developed a code of conduct for offshore manufacturing following accusations of employing bonded labour in Saipan. Following that incident Levi-Strauss immediately required employees in Bangladesh factories to provide proof of age, carried out inspections, and placed underage workers in schools, paying for tuition, books and uniforms in return for jobs, thus enabling them to be portrayed as a "good citizen". She argues incorrectly,⁷²⁰ that in contrast, Wal-Mart had responded to the *NBC Dateline* broadcast by promoting a 'Buy American' campaign in its stores, and by doing so, 'nativism and shopping were thus reconciled with social conscience'. Rather than placing the child workers in schools, she contends that through the 'Buy American' campaign, Wal-Mart effectively entirely dissociated itself from the 'taint of foreignness', blaming Bangladesh as a 'callous society', 'a site of forever failure' where 'Bangladeshi's are eternal victims', 'leaving space for Wal-Mart, *Dateline* and US and European conscientious consumers to have a try at Bangladesh's salvation'. Brooks continues that after *NBC Dateline*, Bangladesh became "a signifier" for child labour. By the end of 1994, she reports, the case for boycotting Bangladeshi imports of clothing was "strongly built".

Brooks mentions that year-on-year from 1992, a growing number of consumers boycotted Bangladeshi-made garments in support of children's rights. She also mentions that the Bangladeshi NGO, UBINIG, complained that the boycott was protectionist and imperialist and moreover that Bangladeshi's were being treated either as, 'stupid innocents' unable to defend themselves from corporate greed, or as fiends who would sell their children to labour in the factories subcontracted by the multinational

⁷¹⁹ The above adds some detail to the explanation for protectionism advanced by Hertel, (2006).

⁷²⁰ This is an important point as Wal-Mart had actually initiated this programme in 1985.

corporations. The boycott, she argues, deprived the people most affected of developing their own solutions.

Shareen Hertel (2006) also considers whether the focus on children's rights might partly have provided a smokescreen for US protectionist interests whose aim was to repatriate manufacturing jobs to the USA. Developing Hertel's argument, in relation to the US context proponents might contend that Senators Pease and Harkin who were behind the Child Labour Deterrence Act, actually cared little for children's rights and only did so because they were in hock to the unions for funding and electoral support. They might further argue that it was no coincidence that the Bill was introduced in August 1992, a few months before the *NBC Dateline* broadcast. Additionally they might point to the links between Terry Collingsworth of the AAFLI and local activist Rosaline Costa from the Hotline agency who had facilitated access for the *NBC Dateline* production team. Moreover, in 1990 Costa had demonstrated the plight of child labourers in Bangladesh to US consumers by bringing children on tour to eighty-six venues in the USA. Indeed well before the Dateline broadcast, early 1991, the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union (UFCW) specifically targeted Wal-Mart's 'Made in America' campaign, calling for a "Mother's Day" boycott of all clothing sold in Wal-Mart stores to protest against the use of child labour in Bangladesh.

Protectionism: The case against the motion.

in contrast to Brooks (2006), and Hertel (2007), Michael Nielsen (2005) found little evidence to support the claim that US protectionism was behind the focus on child labour in Bangladesh in the period leading up to the MoU. Nielsen's account differs from Brooks (2006) as he argues that the focus by NBC on Bangladesh and child labour was 'to some degree a coincidence', as the initial target for *NBC Dateline* had been to expose Wal-Mart's 'Buy American' promotional campaign; 'So this reporter with a television crew goes into a Wal-Mart. Underneath the banner "Buy America" there's these shirts, and he starts looking at them, and they all say Made in Bangladesh' — 'Made in Bangladesh'! ... if they had said 'Made in Mexico,' he would have gone to Mexico'.⁷²¹ Given that a large number of children were employed in the industry in Bangladesh, the programme framed the issue narrowly as comprising child labour and thus sidelined the often dangerous and unsanitary conditions of work and the lack of workers' rights.

Nielsen agrees with Brooks (2006) and Hertel (2007) that the threat posed by the Harkin Bill narrowed the focus away from a general concern with workers' rights and onto the specific issue of child labour. He also concurs with Hertel's claim that this led to a sharp division between NGOs with UNICEF, IPEC and most local NGOs siding with the media and local manufacturers. Nielsen departs from Brooks and Hertel by arguing that the Harkin Bill was effectively deployed by the garment industry to displace blame from itself by redefining the problem away from its exploitation of its workers, to focus instead on the negative consequences for children summarily dismissed from their jobs and as a means to attack supposedly 'malicious critics' of the industry. The accusation of protectionism can be a potent weapon to deploy if one wishes to establish a broad

⁷²¹ Nielsen, (2005, 572).

coalition of interests against perceived outside interference as it invokes strong emotions linked to the fear that the entire industry is under threat and with it the lives of the many thousands of those employed in the RMG sector and of the millions who depended on them. It is thus understandable that at the time arguments to the contrary in Bangladesh were consequently not greeted with much respect or tolerance.

Nielsen describes how in the wake of the *NBC Dateline* broadcast the issue of child labour was amplified by the media in Bangladesh which reframed the problem to focus away from the exploitation of children by garment manufacturers, to make the claim that this was an international protectionist conspiracy against the entire Bangladeshi garment industry that ultimately worked against the interests of the children involved. He also contends that the BGMEA was more exercised about the negative impact of the legislation, the *NBC Dateline* broadcast and subsequent boycotts on the garment industry, than it was about the plight of the children. The focus on child labour led to, 'a sharply polarized debate, in which the negative consequences of the elimination of child labour quickly became a dominant theme.'⁷²²

Nielsen also mentions that for Terry Collingsworth of the AAFLI the Harkin Bill offered a 'wedge' and 'point of leverage' over the BGMEA to do something about educating the children. In his view the re-introduction of the Bill in 1993 and again in July, 1994 maintained this leverage to an extent, although the BGMEA countered with threats to dismiss all child workers, and the Bill lost much of its force each time it was introduced and was effectively stalled once the Republicans assumed power in Congress in the Autumn of 1994. Discussion narrowed onto items such as the size of the problem of child labour and here Nielsen notes that statistics on the number of child labourers working in the industry were unreliable as they were deeply enmeshed in politics, "reflecting the narrow interests of those reporting them".⁷²³

Importantly, Nielsen mentions that a few days after the *NBC Dateline* broadcast Collingsworth had made the BGMEA an offer that they work jointly to provide a framework for the education of children working in the RMG sector. Taken together with Collingsworth's subsequent role in helping establish the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU), this suggests that his goal was not to protect US industry but rather to protect the rights of children. Given that he was working in the US embassy at the time from whence he later made a speech to this effect suggests that this was the official position.

Nielsen argues that media criticism deflected from the BGMEA onto those "northerners" who championed the Harkin Bill. This had the related effect of de-legitimizing the AAFLI and local activists, "charging them with an international conspiracy against the Bangladeshi garment industry, US protectionism, and working against the interests of the

⁷²² Ibid., 572.

⁷²³ The children range in ages from eight to fourteen work in the garment industry. It is reported that most of the children are girls with an average age of just over 13 years. Estimates vary widely with Farida Akhter saying one quarter are below the age of fifteen whilst the BGMEA cites figure of one percent. Ranges quoted are from zero to forty percent. P. 24 in US Department of Labor, (1994), *By the sweat and toil of children, A report to Congress*.

children in question.⁷²⁴ Nielsen concludes that this framing of the issue facilitated the aim of the BGMEA and its oft-repeated threats to summarily dismiss all of the child labourers. Moreover this failed to recognize that at the time the AAFLI was working to establish the Bangladesh Independent Garment-Workers Union (BIGU) staffed by ex-child labourers.⁷²⁵

Nielsen concludes that the threat of trade sanctions posed by the Harkin Bill played a large role in bringing about the MoU, although some of his interviewees argued that a softer approach might have been just as effective if not more so. In response to such concerns, Pharis Harvey commented, “trade sanctions are a very blunt instrument but we were dealing with some very blunt people, and we got their attention.”⁷²⁶

Discussion of Protectionist Arguments

How to explain the contrasting interpretations offered by the three authors mentioned above? While limited, my personal experience provided some purchase for my reading of the accounts summarised above.⁷²⁷ One observation which seems obvious, is that one’s point of view is influenced by one’s point of entry into a situation recalling the well-known trope about the researcher and the elephant. When I visited Bangladesh in 2004 my initial contact was with Rosaline Costa, director of Hotline whom Hertel also describes meeting early on, while Brooks mentions UBINIG as her primary point of contact, and Nielsen, the AAFLI. As illustrated in Figure 6.2 these organizations embody differing ideologies, for example, Hotline had institutional links to the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, while the founders of UBINIG were Marxists, of whom Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who provided theoretical inspiration for Brooks, was a personal friend and the AAFLI played a quasi-governmental role.⁷²⁸

These shade into ideological differences pertaining to rights, as to whether a child has an absolute right to education, or whether this ought to be balanced against their economic right to survival. In light of this the account one provides is given shape as much by the facts one decides to omit or is simply unaware of, as much as those that one chooses to include, and in this complex case there are many facts and differing shades of opinion. This openness to interpretation was recognized by Hertel (2006) who towards the end of her piece briefly discusses three alternative explanations as to why the dispute came to

⁷²⁴ Nielsen, (2005, 573).

⁷²⁵ Nielsen, (2005, 576).

⁷²⁶ Ibid., 575.

⁷²⁷ My contribution, in the form of a reflective conference paper to EGOS and a later presentation to the Macromarketing conference, was distinctively more modest than those of the above. Prior to my visit I knew almost nothing about the RMG industry in Bangladesh nor anything about child labour as my motivation sprang mainly from concern to ensure the welfare of workers in a business in which I had a small interest that had recently moved production to Bangladesh. While I approached several NGOs including UBINIG, only Rosaline Costa from Hotline responded and I ended up staying for a week in the compound that Hotline shared with Caritas.

⁷²⁸ Hertel (2006) does not mention the institutional link of Hotline to the Justice and Peace Commission and I could not find a reference from Brooks (2007) to mentions the personal relation between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Farhad Mazhar mentioned in the latter’s Wikipedia page.

focus exclusively on the topic of child labour as opposed to wider issues pertaining to security of employment and conditions of work.

Looking back at statements made by the sponsors of the “Harkin Bill” at the time, as reiterated by Collingsworth at a press conference from the USA Embassy in Bangladesh, the stated aim of the Bill was to penalize importers who attempted to bring goods made with child labour through customs. Bangladesh was not singled out but was one of fifteen countries named in relation to child labour. In his statement on the Harkin Bill, Senator Pease said nothing about Bangladesh but mentioned the plight of Vincent Guerro, a promising Mexican boy who worked fulltime spreading toxic toluene glue on the soles of athletic shoes, with his bare hands “Within weeks Vincent is home in bed, coughing, with burning eyes and nausea.” (Tonya, 1992, 632).⁷²⁹ On the other hand it is clear that Senator Harkin was appraised of the situation in Bangladesh as he specifically mentioned that Rosaline Costa had told him that 60% of the five hundred workers in the Saraka plant, where twenty-seven people had died in a fire in 1990, were aged under thirteen.⁷³⁰

An important element of the case for protection cited by Ethel Brooks (2006) is the accusation that Wal-Mart responded to the NBC *NBC Dateline* segment by promoting a ‘Buy American’ campaign in its stores, and by doing so, ‘nativism and shopping were thus reconciled with social conscience’. By means of this, she argues, Wal-Mart entirely dissociated itself from the ‘taint of foreignness” and pinned the blame on Bangladesh as a “callous society”. If this allegation against the biggest retailer in the USA had substance it would have leant considerable weight to allegations of protectionism. However, her claim does not square with the facts, given that Sam Walton the founder of Wal-Mart had actually initiated the “Buy American” promotion seven years earlier in 1985.⁷³¹ Indeed, rather than pulling out of Bangladesh or reducing its orders the evidence suggests the opposite, as Wal-Mart announced a new set of sourcing standards and subsequently increased its purchases of garments in Bangladesh which scarcely fits with arguments about protectionism.⁷³²

Failed Boomerang?

The case for.

Hertel (2006) offers an explanation for the prominence of child labour in Bangladesh based on social movement theory (McAdam, 1982). She describes three factors as crucial to the success of a social movement such as that for the elimination of child

⁷²⁹ Tonya references Nardinelli, I. (1990) who mentions Bangladesh as well as Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Mali, Morocco, Nepal, Somalia, Spain, Sudan, and the Republic of Yemen “are pressured by tradition and necessity to bring in money for their poor families” (ibid., 644).

⁷³⁰ Hertel, (2007, 35).

⁷³¹ The campaign ‘was designed to keep the small business sector afloat and work toward a long-range goal of strengthening the free-enterprise system,’ according to ‘The Sam Walton Story,’ a book about the retail icon published in 1991.

⁷³² See for instance Nielsen (2005) who quotes several media sources. At the time of my visit to Bangladesh in 2004, interviewees mentioned that Wal-Mart was extensively involved in Bangladesh and still figured amongst the worst for failing to adhere to standards.

labour; “(a) the political opportunities and constraints confronting any would-be movement; (b) the organizational vehicles available to embryonic movements as sites for mobilization; and (c) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action.”⁷³³ Hertel argues along these lines that savvy activists in Bangladesh and the United States focused on a high-profile industrial sector (garments), a country with an NGO sector replete with potential allies, and on an issue area (children's rights) that was salient in public discourse. These activists identified a political opportunity (the growth of the sector and a potential American protectionist backlash), a mobilizing structure (well-developed NGO sectors in both countries), and a frame (children's rights) and capitalized on them to launch a skilful campaign.

Hertel (2006) describes Rosaline Costa from Hotline Bangladesh as an issue entrepreneur who followed a “boomerang” strategy, which is commonly employed by activists as a vehicle to exert pressure from the outside to shame the BGMEA and the Bangladeshi government into taking action on working conditions in the industry and on child labour.⁷³⁴ She explains that the aim of the strategy was to mobilize support from the US government and to raise the consciousness of consumers to their unknowing complicity in supporting the continuing practice of child labour. Hertel argues that this strategy failed because following the *NBC Dateline* broadcast Costa was isolated and harassed as a social pariah.⁷³⁵ Hertel quotes Bangladesh media reports from that time which, while recognising the unacceptability of child labour (which was illegal in Bangladesh), the Harkin Bill was viewed with considerable trepidation because poverty was at the root of the problem and those behind the Harkin bill in the USA ought to have been cognisant of the reality of the situation.⁷³⁶

Central to Hertel's thesis is that the ‘outside-in’ strategy mainly organised by US activists through the Harkin Bill failed to engage the support of prominent local NGOs such as UBINIG and ASK, nor indeed of other “northern” based agencies such as Save the Children, nor transnational agencies such as UNICEF.⁷³⁷ Hertel quotes accusations from representatives of UBINIG and ASK that the Harkin Bill served as a pretext for US protectionism and particularly the role played by Nur Khan Liton of local NGO ASK, who argued that Senator Harkin had “rashly” misinterpreted ILO guidelines by asking for a complete ban on child labour, thus failing to recognize the prior need for child labourers to obtain the necessities for survival. Liton sought to block the Harkin bill by arguing that

⁷³³ McAdam, (2017).

⁷³⁴ Hertel, (2006, 34).

⁷³⁵ I can confirm this from my interviews with Rosaline Costa. Additionally Richard Timm was effectively expelled from Bangladesh. His visa revoked so he was not able to return to Bangladesh until 1999 when a new visa was issued.

⁷³⁶ Hertel, (2006, 37).

⁷³⁷ Ibid., 42.

this would constitute a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to argue instead that the ‘right to food is no less basic than the right to liberty’.⁷³⁸

Effectively, Hertel argues that Bangladeshi NGOs blocked the Harkin bill. This was firstly, because those behind the “outside-in” campaign were decoupled from the realities of life in Bangladesh. Secondly, whilst blocking assumed many forms, Hertel mentions that the story that some of the children who had been dismissed from factories had become prostitutes was widely circulated throughout NGOs, the ILO and UNICEF.⁷³⁹ She then mentions that the release of the US Department of Labor report, *By the sweat and toil of children* had mentioned new elements in the proposed legislation, including the need to address problems of poverty, “poor education and *lack of opportunity to attend school*”.⁷⁴⁰

Blocking thus appeared to have had its desired affect: Senator Harkin and the Child Labor Coalition had to make explicit their support for economic rights. Given horrific claims of child prostitution, the Child Labor Coalition insisted that the garment manufacturers themselves must assume responsibility for the welfare of children displaced from the factories. Central to any agreement negotiated among the parties, the CLC urged, should be both a remediation program and a factory-monitoring program. The Child Labor Coalition, too, moved to accept the receiving-end activists' demand to include economic rights explicitly in the bargaining framework.⁷⁴¹

Given this turn of events, Hertel then asks why the Child Labor Coalition pushed for a boycott of Bangladeshi goods in 1995,” one of the most widely criticized aspects of its overall involvement in Bangladesh?”⁷⁴² She mentions CLC claims that they only took this course of action as a last resort because the BGMEA had essentially stalled negotiations for a year because they were loath to become involved in the education of children and were resistant to external monitoring of their factories. It was also hoped that Hilary Clinton’s impending visit to Bangladesh on 31st March might provide the impetus to get a

⁷³⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁷³⁹ I tried to track down the source of this claim back in 2004 but found little by way of substantive evidence for it. ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) (US Dept of Labor, 1995, 7).

⁷⁴⁰ Emphasis in Hertel, (2006, 43). I could not find any quote like this in the report. Perhaps this was in the press release? The 1994 report (vol. 1) discusses Bangladesh amongst nineteen countries. Specifically, ‘Conditions for child workers in garment factories vary, but employers and labor officials sometimes argue that the work carried out by young teenagers in garment factories qualifies as “light work.” ILO Convention 138 permits “light work” for 12 and 13 year olds, so long as it is not likely to harm the health or development of young persons, and that it not prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programs, or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received.’ (US Department of Labor, 1994, 12). Source, U.S. Department of Labor. (1994). *By the sweat & toil of children: The use of child labor in American imports*. Washington, DC.

The 1995 report (vol. II) is also wide-ranging report covers twenty-seven industries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Schooling receives a lot of attention. Specifically in relation to Bangladesh, it mentions the ‘historic agreement’ to phase out child labour in Bangladesh and to give adult relatives preference of employment (p. 7); mention that ambassador Merrill had praised the BGMEA for donating \$900,000 to the programme, urging them to act in good faith (p. 17) Source. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, (1995). *By the sweat and toil of children*, Vols 2, US Department of Labor.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 45.

draft MoU over the line. Additionally, the proposed Harkin Bill had lost momentum and leverage since the Republicans had taken over Congress in the autumn of 1994.

Hertel describes how there followed a tit-for-tat exchange between Pharis Harvey of the Child Labor Coalition (CLC) who threatened a consumer boycott countered by the BGMEA with the threat to summarily dismiss all of the remaining children. The boycott came into force on the 20th May and the BGMEA quickly returned to the negotiating table. Hertel quotes a representative of the CLC who stated that the boycott was a last resort and, 'was very short-lived mainly because it was more of a tactic than anything.' She mentions the CLC letter of 2nd June to thirty major American manufacturers that a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was imminent, and asking for their approval of this 'model' program.' The CLC membership was then requested to halt the boycott by 5 July 1995. Finally, Hertel mentions that the CLC regarded as "extremely important" the need to publicize to the BGMEA and the international press, "that the boycott was driven by our concern for children-not a plot by US groups to destroy the Bangladesh garment industry".

"Failed Boomerang": The case against

Nielsen (2005) agrees with Hertel's (2006) statement that prominent NGOs in Bangladesh were vocal against the Harkin Bill, which they accused as protectionist. He notes too that this brought them into a curious alignment with the interests of the BGMEA and (although he does not state this openly), of members of the government who held an extensive stake in the industry. While mentioning correspondence from Pharis Harvey of the CLC to the BGMEA, Hertel does not discuss the extensive role played by the industry, the governments nor the corporations involved. Nielsen reports that on the 26th of December 1992, just a few days after *NBC Dateline* aired, Collingsworth had proposed to the president of the BGMEA that they establish a collaborative scheme to establish schools for the child labourers. To quote Nielsen at length,

The BGMEA would provide 'access to the workers to inform them of the program, physical space for the classrooms where possible, and some degree of financial support'; would 'permit access to the adult workers for AAFLI to provide education and training. Again, the BGMEA would provide physical space and some degree of financial support, as well as cooperation in arranging times when the workers could attend our programs'; and would meet regularly with an AAFLI representative to be presented with information about labour law violations on the part of BGMEA members, at which point the BGMEA would have an opportunity to correct the problems 'before AAFLI used all available means to force compliance with the law'.⁷⁴³

Thus while the core of Hertel's argument is that the local NGOs blocking tactics effectively swung US policy towards allowing the children to continue working, given that Collingsworth was then attached to the US embassy, it seems clear from the above that this policy may have been the official US position all along! As Collingsworth explained it the Harkin Bill was useful as a 'wedge' to get the otherwise recalcitrant BGMEA to move forward on establishing worker rights. Moreover, Nielsen also mentions that two versions of the MoU were later mooted, of which the version which eventually formed the basis for the MoU was to remove all child labourers from the workplace and into schools. However

⁷⁴³ Nielsen, (2005, 568-569).

the second version which would have allowed for a combination of work and education for all children aged over eleven was acceptable to the US embassy, the US Department of Labor, the CLC, ILRF and AAFLI, but was rejected by the BGMEA on the ground that it was 'inconsistent with Bangladeshi law' and 'would not be acceptable to international buyers'.⁷⁴⁴

Nielsen strongly refutes the frequently made argument that the whole affair was 'northern driven', coming from the AAFLI and CLC who were largely ignorant of the realities of life in Bangladesh. He points instead to subsequent effects on local activists such as Rosaline Costa and un-named others as,

another facet of 'northern driven' criticism which is less often discussed: namely, the intimidation, repression and physical violence which local critics often face, which may be part of the reason why 'northern' critics are not always too keen on naming their 'southern' partners. (Nielsen, 2005, 573).

While Hertel paints Rosaline Costa, the director of Hotline, as an isolated figure, Nielsen argues that this is one side of more complex story. As he describes it there were very close links between Costa, Collingsworth and Pharis Harvey. Collingsworth had helped with the tour organised by Costa in 1990 of child labourers from Bangladesh to eighty-six venues in the USA, where they spoke directly of their privations to church communities and to consumers. She had also played a key role in facilitating the *Dateline* media sting that aired in December 1992. While the above seems to cement the argument that Costa was in thrall to "northern" interests, this submerges her continuing support of indigenous minorities through Hotline and her fiercely held commitment to the plight of workers, particularly her concern to improve the opportunities for child labourers, as in 1994, when she and Collingsworth facilitated the formation of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Union (BIGU), the first of its kind set up by former child labourers.

Discussion

Hertel (2006) draws on the tripartite scheme developed by McAdam to identify the key factors that are likely to shape the likelihood of popular support for a given issue as (a) the political opportunities and constraints; (b) the organizational vehicles that constitute sites for collective action and (c) the collective framing of meaning and its interpretation and attribution. These can be summed as political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes.

As Hertel (2007) explains it Rosaline Costa and her (mainly 'northern') allies followed a boomerang strategy in seeking to shame the Bangladeshi government and the BGMEA into taking action on child labour and on the education of children. She maintains that this strategy rebounded because of the formation and rapid growth of a movement that led to the blocking of the Harkin Bill. Hertel's case is based on two claims; firstly, that the intention of 'northern' activists was to eliminate all child labour in Bangladesh; and secondly, that the movement against the Bill was a grassroots movement.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 577.

Taking the first point, Hertel's contention that 'northern' activists played a strong role in proceedings makes sense, as Collingsworth from the AAFLI and Pharis Harvey head of the Child Labor Coalition (CLC) had established a close working relationship.⁷⁴⁵ Collingsworth had close links the CLC, as legal counsel for the US-based International Labour Rights Fund (ILRF) which was a member of the CLC. In the years leading up to the signing of the MoU he had several exchanges with Harvey, who had called for a consumer boycott of garments made in Bangladesh. Collingsworth told Nielsen that he wasn't initially concerned with child labour but became drawn into it when as a union organizer in the RMG sector he noticed the large number of children employed. Indeed there had been suggestions that Collingsworth that some were concerned that he had strayed from his main role in the AAFLI to focus on child labour.

However there is little evidence that the aim was to eliminate all child labour. If one takes what Terry Collingsworth, Pharis Harvey and Rosaline Costa said at face value, then the intention of the AAFLI and CLC was not the summary dismissal of child workers but to ensure that they were educated. Indeed, the summary dismissal of children was the threat made by the BGMEA in response to the *Dateline* broadcast. As mentioned above, four days after the *NBC Dateline* broadcast Collingsworth had proposed to work jointly with the BGMEA to establish a group that would coordinate NGOs and the government to set up schools for child workers.⁷⁴⁶ Later on in the negotiations when two versions of the MoU had been developed, the "northerners" were amenable to the alternative that would have provided for time being set aside for the education of child labourers, whilst the BGMEA opted for the second, which was to remove all child labour.

On the second point, Hertel's description of doughty challengers who established a grassroots movement that stood up to power by engaging in successful collective action does not quite ring true. There is little doubt that the supposed threat of "northern" protectionism aroused deep fears in the hearts of many while simultaneously providing them with a sense of agency and purpose in campaigning against the Harkin Bill. As McAdam (1982) might have explained it, this melding of the affective and cognitive dimensions worked as a powerful social glue. However, there is no doubt that the BGMEA and media were also heavily involved in setting the agenda by effectively re-framing the issue as protectionist, thus posing a threat to the RMG industry and indeed the livelihood of the entire nation, thus moving the complicity of the the industry and of the government out of the limelight and off the hook. As alluded to by Nielsen, the real risk and danger coupled with the courage to stand for principles and to suffer reputational and personal harm, was on the other side of the argument, and not on that of the BGMEA. Subsequently, it seems that the BGMEA stymied the operation of the second MoU by failing to provide its promised funding and thus hampering its operation to the extent that it lost its chief technical adviser.⁷⁴⁷ Depressingly, as is discussed further below, the plight of child labourers and of labourers generally in Bangladesh is still dire today.

⁷⁴⁵ As well as heading up the Child Labor Coalition Harvey was executive director of the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) and Collingsworth as its legal counsel.

⁷⁴⁶ Nielsen, (2005, 568).

⁷⁴⁷ UNICEF/ILO, (2004).

The Role of Business

Nielsen asks, “what about the Bangladeshi government, the garment manufacturers, the international buyers?” This is a good point, as it was mentioned earlier that two versions of the MoU were available, one of which would have enabled children aged eleven or so to engage in a combination of work and education, while the other would move all those children into school. In Nielsen’s view the focus by activists on the negative consequences of eliminating child labour led to the redefinition of the problem and narrowing the agenda in a manner that transferred moral culpability from corporations to their critics.⁷⁴⁸ He mentions that in relation to the employment of children in the RMG sector, the general feeling of corporations operating in Bangladesh at the time the *NBC Dateline* segment aired was, ‘more or less tacit acceptance that ‘that’s just the way things are done over here’.⁷⁴⁹

Wal-Mart

Despite its projected hard image of an organisation that is prepared to sacrifice the wellbeing of its workers to the bottom line, sweated child labour seemed a step too far even for Wal-Mart. Those who surmised that *NBC Dateline* came as a total surprise for Wal-Mart executives were half-right, because they would have been forewarned by the action taken by Levi-Strauss much earlier that year to place child workers in their two factories in school and by communications between Pharis Harvey of the CLC and David Dayne Glass, CEO of Wal-Mart, and between Glass and the BGMEA. The images of child labour shown in the documentary would nonetheless have come as a nasty surprise for Glass given that twelve days before the *NBC Dateline* segment aired the BGMEA had written to him, ‘assuring the company that all necessary steps had been taken to ensure that BGMEA garments would be child-free’. Nielsen describes the shock; ‘Reeling from the negative exposure from the Dateline program, Mr Glass responded with a detailed letter which included commitment by Wal-Mart to establish a fund for factories and/or garment associations in order to help educate the children of Bangladesh.’ It was also reported that an immediate consequence of the programme was the report that Wal-Mart had introduced new buying and sourcing standards.⁷⁵⁰

While the *NBC Dateline* broadcast had an immediate effect on Wal-Mart’s share price, which dropped by 3.7%, it quickly recovered to just over half of the loss and over the course of the next year a series of other factors came into play that affected the price.⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁸ Nielsen, (2005, 580).

⁷⁴⁹ Nielsen, (2005, 563).

⁷⁵⁰ Nielsen, (2005, 569). Glass had walked out of NBC interview where he was confronted with images of child labour involved in the manufacture of Wal-Mart clothes, but later invited the reporter back. Source, *NBC questions Wal-Mart's 'Buy American' campaign*. UPI Archives, 22nd December 1992.

⁷⁵¹ Hayes, T.C. (1992) Wal-Mart disputes report on labor. *New York Times*, 24th December. The Wal-Mart stock price actually rose to \$3.45 by March 1993 but thereafter fell, largely due to a stock-split once the corporation went public, and due to concerns unrelated to the *Dateline* programme. At the time of my research in Bangladesh in 2004, Wal-Mart was mentioned by several of those I interviewed as one of the worst.

Indeed 1992 was generally a record year for the retail giant⁷⁵² (the corporation has since resurrected its “buy American” policy several times since). Walton apparently initiated the Buy American policy when he saw small-town customers losing their jobs, writing to 3,000 businesses in the USA to tell them Wal-Mart wants to buy more US goods.⁷⁵³ Following the furore in 1992, Wal-Mart’s launch of another “Buy American campaign in 2013 was greeted with the following jibe, “Like Sam Walton’s promises twenty years ago Bill Simon’s rediscovery of American manufacturing in 2013 isn’t worth the paper his press release is printed on”.⁷⁵⁴ Then in 2021 Wal-Mart, by then the largest importer of Chinese goods into the USA, pledged once more to buy more US manufactured goods.⁷⁵⁵

In general terms although clearly mindful of the need for public relations, Wal-Mart’s actions exemplify Milton Friedman’s (1970) injunction that profitability should be the sole interest and focus of the corporate executive. The evidence suggests that the *NBC Dateline* segment had little effect on discouraging value-oriented Wal-Mart shoppers over the Christmas period. Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton had made his single-minded concern to privilege customer value over the interests of employees for a decent standard of living and security of employment, as a lever to it becoming the biggest retailer in the USA; “I pay low wages. I can take advantage of that. We’re going to be successful, but the basis is a very low-wage, low-benefit model of employment”.⁷⁵⁶ Wal-Mart stood out against other retailers but not for the best of reasons, as another commentator noted, in an America “blissfully uninterested in reckoning with the structural forces of inequality, Wal-Mart stands as a marked exception... and...its relations to politics, economics, labor, culture and community cohesion as a major cultural problem in the modern United States (Jessen, Adams, 2011, 117).

Wal-Mart’s hard-nosed image was reinforced in Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2001) memoir *Nickel and Dimed*, about her time as a sales associate at Wal-Mart, where she worked long hours for low pay and little time for discussion with other employees and random work rescheduling, in an environment that strongly discouraged unionisation. Ehrenreich’s book aroused considerable controversy and was followed by a PBS *Frontline* programme, *Is Wal-Mart Good For America*, which aired in 2004 and the sequel, *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, in November 2005. Given its sheer size and obsessive relentlessness in driving down prices, once a Wal-Mart “Big Box is constructed in a small town the “Wal-Mart Effect” changes the entire retail landscape, depresses employee wages and conditions of work and ultimately crushes much of the retail giant’s competition. This has led some authors to question the moral equation whether the sum total of the savings to customers yielded by “the Wal-Mart effect exceeds the costs to its direct employees and

⁷⁵² On 27th February 1992 Wal-Mart reported that profit had rise by 25% to a record \$1.61 billion in 1991.

⁷⁵³ Kilborn, P. (1985). Wal-Mart’s “Buy American”, *New York Times*, section D1, p, 1, 10th April.

⁷⁵⁴ Norman, A. (2013) Wal-Mart discovers “Made in America – Again!, *Huff Post*, 22nd Jan.

⁷⁵⁵ Heller, L. (2023. Wal-Mart’s made in the USA claim, fact or fiction? *Forbes*, 28th June.

⁷⁵⁶ Quote from, PBS, (2004) *Is Wal-Mart Good For America: Inside the World’s Largest Company*. <https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-wal-mart-good-america/>. See also, NeCastro, M. (2014), 46.

those who labour in its supply chain and to the environment?⁷⁵⁷ In 2021, Wal-Mart also fell foul of a report by the Clean Clothes Campaign of free riding on the efforts of those who signed up to the International Accord for Safety and Health that would protect the safety of workers, whilst refusing to sign itself.⁷⁵⁸ Additionally, it has been the target of a lively anti-Walmart movement.⁷⁵⁹

How has Wal-Mart countered such negative publicity? Apart from its much vaunted “value” proposition, Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman (2001) argued some time ago that its strategy was to wrap itself in the flag of patriotism, although as mentioned above, each time it decides to haul out its “Buy American” theme, Wal-Mart today tends to attract as much sarcasm as praise.

Levi-Strauss

Nielsen mentions that along with Wal-Mart, Levi-Strauss and other major brands were involved in talks in Bangladesh in early 1993, although he provides no further details of what transpired. It is noteworthy that Levi Strauss adopted a different approach to Wal-Mart’s in relation to child labour in Bangladesh. Six months prior to the *NBC Dateline* broadcast the corporation had announced the discovery of child workers in two factories in Bangladesh which contravened its new Sourcing Guidelines and that it had made arrangements for their schooling.⁷⁶⁰ In a decision that foreshadowed the final MoU that came into force three years later in July 1995, Levi-Strauss agreed to pay the salaries of the children enrolled in school.

Levi-Strauss had good reason to implement a new system of Global Sourcing Guidelines in 1991 following a damaging news report that a supplier to Levi-Strauss and twenty-seven other US companies based in the Northern Mariana islands in Saipan had abused its workforce which mainly comprised immigrants. This story was reported to be ‘especially embarrassing’ because goods manufactured in the Northern Mariana Island, a US protectorate, could be labelled “Made in the USA”.⁷⁶¹ Given this when it came to Bangladesh, the company was already “up and running” in relation to worker exploitation. During my visit to Bangladesh in 2004 I learned that Levi Strauss had played a positive mediating role with the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) in resolving a dispute involving forty-eight employees who had been dismissed by Beximco, a major producer of garments, for assaulting a supervisor.

⁷⁵⁷ Fishman, (2006, 8. 9 & 11).

⁷⁵⁸ Clean Clothes Campaign, (2022). *A decade after Bangladesh’s most deadly factory fires, brands like Walmart still ignore workers’ safety*.

⁷⁵⁹ Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, (2010).

⁷⁶⁰ Levi-Strauss & Co. (1992). Bangladesh workers back to school, *News Watch*, 30th June, p. 2.

⁷⁶¹ Smithsonian Center, *Levi-Strauss, (1991) terms of engagement*. Shenon, P., (1993). Made in the USA? Hard Labour on a Pacific Island, No American Dream. *The New York Times*, 18th July. In 1999 a class action was brought against twenty-seven US companies including Gap, J.C. Penney & Co and Target. Levi’s was added in 2001. The suit was dropped in 2004 following a \$20 million out of court settlement. See, Staff Reporters, (2004). Saipan Levi Case Dismissed, *Women’s Wear Daily*, 9th January. The suit had alleged that up to 30,000 workers had been treated as indentured labour between 1989 and 2002.

A Fire and Safety Accord was signed in 2015 by 173 brands to protect workers following the Rana Plaza tragedy, by far the worst of many such incidents and in 2021 this was updated by expanding its provisions to other countries with a history of violations. Levi-Strauss did not sign up to this, proclaiming its standards as second to none. It is important to mention that over the years Levi-Strauss has studiously curated its brand identity to resonate with the values of its target market. Its stand against pollution was eulogized by Greenpeace International, with its declaration in 2012 to become a “Detox leader”, reiterated in 2017 for its “Too dirty to wear” promotion⁷⁶² Its aim for a hip countercultural image was evident not just from the content of “Go Forth” ad that showed a man confronting riot police in 2011, but that it had to pull the ad due to actual violence.⁷⁶³ However, in 2022 Levi’s came under fire from a concerted campaign to force it to sign an expanded Fire and Safety Accord. The corporation’s assertion that its standards were second to none was contradicted in an excoriating report by the Clean Clothes Campaign (2022) which accused Levi-Strauss not only of free-riding on the Accord’s efforts but also because its suppliers scored “very poorly” on safety.⁷⁶⁴

The BGMEA

That several authors including Brooks and Hertel are largely silent on the role played by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) is perhaps unsurprising, given the difficulty of access, but worthy of note as this organization was one of the main players in the affair. Nielsen (2005) on the other hand argues that their role was deliberately obscured thanks to their re-framing of the issue to deflect attention from them. Nielsen (2005) contends that the BGMEA was the main target for activists such as Rosaline Costa and Terry Collingsworth and in his view their aim was to ensure a pathway for child education and to remove abuses against adults working in the RMG sector. In this understanding, following the introduction of the Harkin Bill and *NBC Dateline*, accusations of conspiracy and betrayal made by the media and NGOs such as UBINIG and ASK, that this was a conspiracy to destroy the RMG sector in Bangladesh, perfectly suited the aims of the BGMEA.

Gilbert (2018) notes that although the plight of young women in the RMG sector has been extensively documented, that of business or its owners has received scant attention from researchers. He mentions that one reason for this may have been the reluctance of, ‘post-critical’ ethnographers who have been reluctant, ‘to engage with questions of class, exploitation, and capitalism, particularly when this may lead to critical depictions of one’s ethnographic subjects’.⁷⁶⁵ In his study Gilbert (2018) did not find much alignment between bureaucrats attempting to build “Brand Bangladesh” and the internationally mobile elite, many of whom owned RMG factories. In contrast, the elite who lived in the relatively pacific area of Gulshan appeared more interested in ensuring their own social

⁷⁶² Grenpeace International, (2012). Levi’s shapes up to be a Detox leader, 13th December.

⁷⁶³ Neate, R. (2011). Levis pulls “riot ad” after UK violence, The Guardian, 11th August.

⁷⁶⁴ Clean Clothes Campaign, (2022, 4).

⁷⁶⁵ Gilbert, (2018, 44-45).

reproduction than in corporate governance as a means to stimulate inward investment.⁷⁶⁶ Retaining old-style connections and values of “club-ability” that hark back to the British occupation, members of the elite distinguish themselves from the *nouveau riche* who more recently have gained access to resources through their political connections. To illustrate how the Gulshan elite acts to maintain its interests Gilbert quotes Sabur, who bluntly argued against the attempt to build “Brand Bangladesh” to attract inward investment noting that over the years, “as quality of governance goes down, growth goes up. Maybe we should discourage intervention”.⁷⁶⁷ Gilbert quotes Ijaz, a development broker that, ‘Bangladesh is the Walmart of suppliers; it’s the lowest cost. It’s an inherent hedge—a real grab for value’⁷⁶⁸ and, if Gilbert’s paper is anything to go by, then it seems still to be in the interests of the elite to keep it that way.

What of the legacy of the MoU? The final report by IPEC (2004) stated that child labour had fallen tiny proportion of the overall workforce in BGMEA factories.

Government

At one time purportedly labelled as a ‘basket case’ by Henry Kissinger, the crisis provoked by the introduction of the Harkin Bill and the *NBC Dateline* broadcast occurred just as military rule ended with a move to “elected authoritarian rule” by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) in alliance with the hardline fundamentalist Jamaat-I-Islami against the Awami League (AL). Although in 1992 neither the broadcast nor those who proposed the Harkin Bill mentioned the Bangladeshi government, subsequent investigations in the wake of the collapse of the Rana Plaza on 24th April 2013, revealed extensive links between government and the RMG industry. According to a report produced following the disaster ten percent of members of parliament owned RMG factories and 50% had industry links of some sort. Mohammad Fazlul Azim, a member of parliament in 2013 and head of the Azim Group with 23 factories, who spoke out that while costs had doubled corporate buyers responded by telling him to increase productivity. The report also mentioned that factory owners ruthlessly suppressed dissent through the action of an “Industrial Police”, keeping wages low to increase their profits.⁷⁶⁹

At the time, Mohammed Yunus, who at time of writing is president of Bangladesh, called for a common minimum wage at double the prevailing rate of the time, asking, “Would a consumer in a shopping mall feel upset if they were asked to pay \$35.50 instead of \$35 for the item of clothing?”⁷⁷⁰ If these were the Wal-Mart consumers envisaged by Sam

⁷⁶⁶ Gilbert, (2018,50).

⁷⁶⁷ Gilbert, (2018, 51).

⁷⁶⁸ Gilbert, (2018, 49).

⁷⁶⁹ Chalmers, J. (2013). *Special Report: how textile kings weave a hold on Bangladesh*. Reuters, 3rd May.

⁷⁷⁰ Burke, J. (2013). Muhammad Yunus appeals to west to help Bangladesh's garment industry. *The Guardian*, 12th May.

Walton, it seems the answer is likely to be “yes”.⁷⁷¹ A report by McKinsey (2011) two years prior to the Rana Plaza disaster highlighted that the ‘hard’ advantages for RMG buyers doing business in Bangladesh were capacity and price, with the latter as the prime advantage. The report had also pointed to an insufficiently skilled workforce and to serious lack of investment in machinery and technology.

At the time of the *NBC Dateline* broadcast in 1992 Bangladesh was ranked one of the least developed nations at 135th on the UN Human Development Index⁷⁷² A World Bank report of that year mentioned the need for “structural adjustment “ in light of endemic corruption, “ shortages and increasing militancy of skilled labour” as an ‘efficiency limiting’ barrier to private sector development in manufacturing.⁷⁷³ The continuing power of the military was evident in that 17% of the budget was devoted to defence. By 2025 Bangladesh had risen to 130th on the HDI, a seemingly modest but important increase which indicated that the country had progressed to the level of “medium human development” and was now on an equal footing with India.⁷⁷⁴

Given the significant improvement in human development, one might have imagined that the lot of workers, particularly of child labourers in the RMG sector, had improved in the interim. There has been no shortage of initiatives from government and NGOs. The National Child Labor Elimination Policy (NCLEP) was formulated in 2010 to protect children working in the formal sector, to ensure their education and provide a framework to eliminate child labour. In 2015 the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy set a minimum age of twelve for “domestic light work” and a number of agencies are now tasked with monitoring and responding to violations of child labour laws.⁷⁷⁵ In light of this it is deeply depressing that the ILO recently criticized the government of Bangladesh in very strong terms relating to its non-observance of key conventions.⁷⁷⁶

Witness Testimony

Ethel Brooks (2005) applies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work on the subaltern to the witness testimony provided by child labourers to western audiences. As she portrays it the anti-sweatshop movement is as vampiric as capitalism by feeding off the real suffering of people and transforming this into surplus value in the form of slick schooled accounts that are engineered to evoke the sympathy of legislators and groups of citizens

⁷⁷¹ From reading Fishman (2006) the answer to that question is that Wal-Mart would probably oppose such a move. He describes how the corporation removed cardboard packaging that cost around a nickel from lines of products

⁷⁷² UNDP, (1992), *Human Development Report*, Oxford University Press, Table 1.2, 20.

⁷⁷³ Khan, (1993, 153). See also Transparency International which ranked Bangladesh as 151/ 180 countries.

⁷⁷⁴ UNDP, (2025). A matter of choice: People and possibilities in the age of AI. Human Development Report, 2025, Table 1, 276.

⁷⁷⁵ See Hoq, (2024, esp. Table 4: Institutional arrangements to tackle child labour in Bangladesh.

⁷⁷⁶ ILO, (2025). *Decision concerning the report by the Government of Bangladesh on progress made in the implementation of the road map to address all outstanding issues mentioned in the article 26 complaint concerning alleged non-observance of Conventions Nos 81, 87 and 98*. GB.353/INS/9(Rev.1)/Decision. Geneva, 10th-10th March.

in the USA and in Europe. Brooks employs Spivak's distinction between 'History 1' and 'History 2' to discuss anti-sweatshop actions such as the US tours and testimony provided by child labourers whose 'living proof' forms History 2, the surplus value, M', that is required by the system of anti-sweatshop activism to reproduce itself. In this understanding the incorporation of History 2 into History 1 involves considerable epistemic violence that extracts surplus value from the suffering of others and which casts the subject into an impossible position when they are asked to 'bear witness to something that is impossible to bear witness to'. The unsayable is negated as words are stuffed into the mouth of the victim who is then confronted with the alienating rote repetition of events they have suffered that seem to have happened to someone else.

In my view Brooks has a point as during my brief visit to Bangladesh in 2004 I also experienced an unsettling and curiously distanced feeling when listening to similar accounts from those who had been child workers. For Brooks, 'there is an impossibility of understanding classed sites in Bangladesh once they travel along transnational circuits...that 'labour may be politically and juridically free but is socially unfree...that such 'living proof' "shows the limits of capital's and protest's abilities to extract surplus value from the bodies of women."⁷⁷⁷ This is of course intimately bound up with power relations as this contends that child labourers are exploited as they are moulded by "northern" interests to do what they would not otherwise have chosen to do. Yet my experience is different. During my visit to Bangladesh I spent a good deal of time with Sheik Nazma and Kalpona and Babul Akhter who had all been child labourers. While at first their accounts and those of others I listened to had the formal quality of the performance of "witness testimony" that Brooks describes, this soon changed as I got to know them better. They did not have to tell me of reality of violence, as this was all around.

On the other hand, one might offer a different view informed by McAdam et al., (2001), that identity is not immutable but malleable, and that particularly in situations involving contentious politics, the strategic presentation of self can be manipulated and changed in the course of interaction. Additionally, these theorists ask us to bear in mind the importance of certification, or the requirement for individuals to be treated with respect by others to ensure that they take their claims seriously. In situations where the stakes are so high one might suggest that it is understandable that when standing before church groups or members of the US Congress, some form of schooling of "witness testimony" would have been imperative if the plight of the individuals concerned to be taken seriously and acted upon.

Summing Up

How then to evaluate the two Memoranda of Understanding and their aftermath? In the short term it seems that these were successful, at least to the extent of removing child labour is concerned as the final report by IPEC (2004) stated that children constituted a tiny proportion of overall labour in BGMEA factories. However, the authors mentioned that while the BGMEA had 'benefited greatly from the child labour free status...financial

⁷⁷⁷ Brooks, (2007, 152).

contributions towards the MOU are long overdue'. Lack of finance was cited as having significantly impacted the management and monitoring of the project; the number of government inspectors was grossly insufficient and the BGMEA could not be trusted to monitor the situation on its own.

In the longer the report of a comprehensive study of workers in the RMG sector by Kliuha et al. (2025) makes for depressing reading. The authors found that all of the children interviewed were employed illegally and that, against the presumption that child labour is confined to the informal domestic market, one-fifth of the children interviewed worked in factories that produced exclusively for the export market.⁷⁷⁸ One of the report's recommendations was to "Cease, remediate and prevent child labour".⁷⁷⁹ For adults, persistent problems remained in subcontracted factories who experienced production pressures, late payment of wages and being paid below the minimum. Report states that, 'discrimination, underpayment, abuse, and exploitative practices are systemic across the sector, and worsened for those working at subcontracted factories. This depressing quote is all the moreso given that the Nazma Sheik and Kalpona had been motivated to strike because of non-payment of wages.

Child labour remains a pressing issue in Bangladesh today, despite the existence of an established legal framework and an institutional apparatus consisting of state, local NGOs and transnational agencies to monitor and to regulate it and ameliorate the worst excesses.⁷⁸⁰

Finally, it should be mentioned that the focus on developing countries shifted attention away from the extensive use of forced labour in the US and in Europe. Cooper mentions in relation to the discovery of indentured child labourers from Thailand in California and New York in 1995, that,

...many interest groups preferred to confine their campaigns to the squalid conditions in the developing world. Perhaps it was easier and more politically advantageous to blame multinationals and seemingly uncaring Third World legislators for the problem than to try to rectify such complex inequities at home (Cooper, 1997, 412).

Case Conclusion

Congratulations are due if you have managed to read from the start of this case to this point. My motivation to read accounts against the grain in order to substantiate facts and query assumptions has perhaps been partly successful but has led to me infiltrating my

⁷⁷⁸ Kliuha, A.; Lois Bosatta, Katarina Schwarz et al., (2025). *Modern slavery and child labour in Bangladesh's garment sector: Documenting risks and informing solutions*. University of Nottingham Rights Lab, 120.

⁷⁷⁹ The conditions of employment for al 122 minors interviewed violated terms of the 2006 Act making them illegally employed. (ibid., 29). Wages were lower than adults who did the same amount of work; one third had to work in servicing machine parts; most were subjected to verbal and some to physical abuse; while most regretted this, virtually none attended school because of family need or they could not afford fees. They believed that they would have been able to secure better jobs if they had achieved better schooling

⁷⁸⁰ Hoque, (2024), table 3, p. 5 and table 4, p. 6.

own biases. It is depressing that scandalous working conditions still appear to be common and that victims of Rana Plaza are still traumatized (Begum, 2023).

From my reading there seems to be little evidence that the focus on child labour was a protectionist ploy and rather the weight of evidence supports that this resulted from the actions of social activists in Bangladesh and in the USA. I find Hertel's (2007) argument that this is an example of a "reverse boomerang" party supported (a) because the provision of education for child workers was supported by the AAFLI and the US administration perhaps from the start and (b) because there was more involvement from activists within Bangladesh than is mentioned in her account. That said there remain many 'known-unknowns' such as the communications between prominent "northern" brands and the BGMEA, of which there were likely many, and between these actors and the governments, the ILO and UNICEF. Nielsen (2005) seems to reflect the spirit of Dahl in such complex cases by calling for,

more in-depth analyses—including clear, detailed and documented chronologies of events—of why concrete changes that involve a shift towards corporate responsibility in the governance of social justice have occurred and taken on particular forms. By focusing on the struggles between conflicting forces and the selective inclusion and exclusion of issues, groups or organizations, such specific histories could be a significant counterforce in (and outside) a CSR discourse which is increasingly glossy, highly dominated by managerial needs and concerns, business cases and best practices, 'partnerships' and 'dialogues'.⁷⁸¹

I might add that I have now become something of a convert to archival sources of information as a necessary supplement to interview data, for where the latter is often self-interested, the latter can show where the bodies are buried. This has caused me to wonder about access to corporate archives and indeed the extent to which what if anything is being archived today?

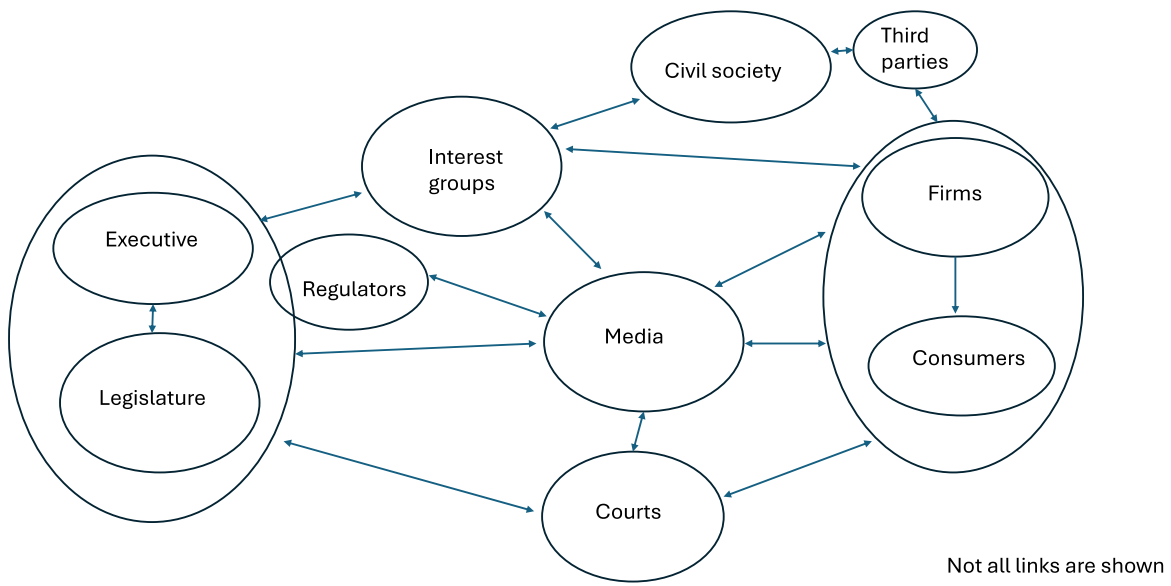
Towards a More Complex Model

The above case is complex involving a host of different agencies.. Civil society groups seek to mobilize consumer support by boycotting brands or to take direct action on others' behalf. There is also the power exercised by the elite, constituted not only those who live in luxury penthouses who lord it over the bonded labourers who service their lifestyles, but also by the materialistic "Northern" consumer so engrossed with constructing their identity project and with associated status games that they simply can't be bothered looking elsewhere.⁷⁸²

The more complex model below perhaps better illustrates the complexity of issues pertaining to power in the context of consumption. As per Dahl, the basic building blocks consist of the political realm (legislature and executive arms and quasi-governmental bodies), the courts, interest groups, churches, charities and other civil society organizations, business, consumers, third-parties and last but not least, the media, together with their inter-relations.

⁷⁸¹ Nielsen, (2005, 579).

⁷⁸² See for instance the material on consumer identity projects in CCT research, (Arnauld & Thompson, 2005).



Section Four: Direct Action Beyond the Law

The above references to legality and legitimacy signal the importance of recognizing legal constraints on the scope of the actions of A and B. They also highlight the interrelation between what happens in the economy, the judicial system and in politics. While B is accorded freedom of speech in calling for a boycott of A, in a democratic country it would be illegal for them to impede A's lawful business, for example, by occupying or blocking access to A's premises, in which case A would be justified in calling on the State power of the police. Similarly, it would be illegal for A to intimidate or threaten individual members of B. In the *McLibel* case it turned out that one of the two members of London Greenpeace who were sued by McDonald's had not written the offending leaflet which had actually been co-authored by an undercover police officer who conveniently disappeared prior to the case. It also subsequently emerged that McDonald's had met with members of the Metropolitan Police to discuss the case and had hired several private detectives to dig dirt on members of London Greenpeace. Such actions, particularly the duplicitous role of the police in this way undermine faith in the justice system and in democracy.

In 2012 Greenpeace began a concerted legal campaign to "Save the Arctic" in seeking to prevent oil corporations from drilling for oil and gas. This succeeded in forcing Shell to discontinue its programme of Arctic exploration and later pushed the Obama administration in the USA to abandon all drilling in US waters, slowing down the exploitation of this once pristine landscape.⁷⁸³ Greenpeace subsequently successfully sued the Norwegian government to prevent them from drilling for oil in their sector of the arctic. However the group's actions to stop drilling for gas by Russia went seriously awry when Russian agents fired shots at a group of activists who were peacefully trying to board a drilling platform and then attacked and boarded the *Arctic Sunrise* and took her crew of thirty into detention.⁷⁸⁴ This effectively demonstrated the limits of direct action, which relies crucially that all parties respect the rule of law.⁷⁸⁵ Clearly Vladimir Putin had other ideas.

A difficulty arises when those who are concerned about some aspect of corporate misbehaviour with respect to some issue feel that their 'votes' will not make a difference. While organizations such as Greenpeace strive to work within the law other groups may work outside the liberal consensus by resorting to direct actions that involve the harassment of employees, occupation of buildings, or damage to stock. The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) which was formed in the early 1970s to call attention to the hidden exploitation and cruelty imposed on animals eventually employed tactics such as

⁷⁸³ Greenpeace International, (2023). After 13 days and nearly 4,000km – Greenpeace occupation of Shell oil platform ends with no arrests. Greenpeace Release. 12th Feb. Glaser, April, (2015). In late 2015 Shell announced that it was abandoning its quest to pump oil in the Arctic. (April Glaser, You did it! Shell abandons arctic drilling. Greenpeace Release 30th September.

⁷⁸⁴ Vidal, J. (2014). Arctic 30: Russia releases Greenpeace ship. *The Guardian*, 6th June.

⁷⁸⁵ Greenpeace International, (2024). Putin vs Greenpeace: the story of the Arctic 30, and why it still matters today, *Greenpeace Release*, 4th June. Sterling, Toby (2017). Arbitration panel tells Russia to pay Dutch \$6 million over Greenpeace boat seizure, *Reuters*, 18th July.

bombings, arson and other forms of physical violence to staff employed by Huntington Life Sciences, Oxford University and those of contractors involved in the construction of buildings to be used for animal experimentation. At the peak of the protest, the UK government offered to deploy troops to help secure the buildings. The UK then ratified changes in the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2004, which created an offence of aggravated trespass to cover buildings. Company and University staff were protected by enforcing anti-harassment laws.⁷⁸⁶

More recently, groups such as *Extinction Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil*, have evolved generally more peaceful tactics, blocking traffic, interrupting sporting and cultural events, smashing windows and defacing artworks. In November 2023 nine members of *Extinction Rebellion* caused a reputed £500,000 of damage to the windows of the Canary Wharf headquarters of banking giant HSBC. The group argued that the damage they caused was in protest at the bank's continued investments in fossil fuels from which it had made eighty million dollars since the Paris Climate Agreement. The rationale they put forward for their defence was based on arguments for positive liberty, that when considered from a rational perspective, executives of the bank would have been justified for breaking their own windows. In response to the actions of *Extinction Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil*, the UK government introduced the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, (2022), which extended the powers of the police to prevent "significant" disruption, or "delay to the delivery of a time-sensitive product to consumers of that product", restrict "static demonstrations", issue 'Serious Disruption Prevention Orders' and to label 'persistent offenders' as terrorist groups. In July 2024 five activists who had encouraged others to close down the motorway system around London were each given jail sentences of up to five years. While the judge acknowledged the scientific rationale that human-made climate change is a reality and that action should be taken to avert it, but that nevertheless, the protestors had "crossed the line, from campaigner to fanatic".⁷⁸⁷

Some groups are more diffuse and ephemeral than those described above. In the appropriately entitled *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, George McKay describes a number of cause groups that are fluid and amorphous, with no clear structure, hierarchy or spokespersons.⁷⁸⁸ A feature of every democracy, in the UK one can think of the 'New Age travellers', 'crusties' and protestors against road development that were prevalent in the 1990s, and the *Occupy* movement that rose up in capital cities in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. "Swampy" – no-one knew his real name – achieved media celebrity having spent a week in a tunnel during a road protest in the 1990s. Although insisting that he was part of a movement that had no head, nonetheless he was labelled as 'spokesman' for this diverse movement.

While commentators often point to these generally leftist groups one of the most potent in terms of achieving its aims was the sectional group that formed to combat the UK

⁷⁸⁶ See Grant, W., (2005) for more detail.

⁷⁸⁷ Gayle, Damien, (2024). Five Just Stop Oil activists receive record sentences for planning to block M25. *The Guardian*, 18th July.

⁷⁸⁸ McKay, George (1996) *Senseless acts of beauty: cultures of resistance since the sixties*, London: Verso.

government at the turn of the Millenium. Consider the situation where the British Prime Minister makes a televised appeal for calm, stating that troops have been deployed to help and he is considering recalling Parliament to discuss the rapidly deteriorating situation. Local chambers of commerce report that businesses are losing hundreds of millions of pounds a day, the Royal Mail says it only has resources for one more day's deliveries, supermarkets are reporting signs of panic buying and are rationing essentials, the National Health Service has been placed on an emergency footing, and there are reports that petrol stations around the country will run out of fuel within forty-eight hours. At a hastily convened press conference the Prime Minister addresses the nation,

No government, indeed no country can retain credibility in its democratic process or its economic policy-making were it to give in to such protests. Real damage is being done to real people... we will listen, but we will not be intimidated.⁷⁸⁹

This is not science-fiction but describes the set of events that almost drove the United Kingdom to its knees in a matter of weeks in the year 2000. This was not a radical plot, nor left-wing conspiracy, but rather a loose alliance of independent fuel delivery drivers and farmers who halted deliveries and blocked fuel terminals in response to rapid price rises. An alliance of drivers with the opposition Conservative Party organised, "Boycott the Pumps" and "Dump the Pumps" campaigns against the Labour government. The "Gilets jaune" movement in France similarly mobilised mass support against the imposition by the Macron government of an environmentally motivated tax on fuel. Together these cases show that effective unrest can come from the Right as well as the Left.

Although the UK fuel protests are now a distant memory, the blockage of major traffic routes by truckers protesting against a steep rise in the price of fuel in September 2000 is noteworthy, because of how quickly the panic spread amongst consumers, business and government. The dispute escalated to the extent that the prime minister ordered troops to ferry fuel to petrol stations, threatening to recall parliament.⁷⁹⁰ News reporters initially searched in vain for the 'leaders' of this movement finding Brynle Williams, a sheep and cattle farmer and vice-chairman of the Flintshire branch of the Farmers' Union of Wales, and Richard Haddock. These 'spokespersons' who eventually and somewhat reluctantly came forward insisted that there was no leadership. This was also a characteristic of the protest by truckers in Ottawa against Covid restrictions in 2022.

⁷⁸⁹ Wintour, P. & J. Wilson (2000). Blair's pleas are ignored as Britain grinds to a halt. *The Guardian*, 14th September. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/14/tonyblair.oil>

General Conclusion

This chapter introduces Robert Dahl's theory of power and acknowledges him as a more rounded figure than he is sometimes portrayed. The strengths of Dahl's approach lie in the attention accorded to the detailed recording of facts and events, a monotonous, tedious and time-consuming task that is nonetheless worthwhile, because at the end of the day, facts matter. The pressures of academic life today are such that it can be tempting to fit facts to one's favourite theory, for after all, one is evaluated by referees not so much on the basis of the facts one presents as on one's theoretical contribution.

Scope for Social movement theory?

Dahl's theory of power works best when one is dealing with a clear-cut "A" and "B" that operate within the formal pluralist system and not with dynamic situations involving loose and shifting constellations of interests that operate largely outside of the formal system. I thus turned to explore the potential of social movement theories such as political process theory developed by Doug McAdam and his colleagues (McAdam et al., 2001) as more amenable to explanations that focus on process and change. While these theorists are also interested in causality there are of course major differences between their focus on social transactions and relational interactions rather than on rationalist accounts of key decisions involving individuals. While focusing on complex social processes, the attempt by social movement theorists to simplify this by identifying causal chains consisting of mechanisms that appear in a variety of settings in different sequences, would no doubt have appealed to Dahl,

It's great to look out at night and see the stars but you're not understanding anything about the nature of the universe. It has to be simplified. And in simplification you lose some potential information, but the gain is to provide comprehensibility and coherence. (Dahl, p. 7, in Dahl & Levi, 2009).

From the above there is in my view scope for the application of social movement theory to the study of power in contexts of marketing and consumption. However, given that this often involves studies of hundreds if not thousands of incidents, there is also room for qualitative studies such as that of child labour in Bangladesh, which are complex and indeed indeterminate in some respects, given the number of actors, differing accounts and the absence of information on the actions of corporations and governments behind the scenes. Where social theorists focus on interaction, this case highlights the significant role played by particular individuals such as Rosaline Costa and Terry Collingsworth without whose action things could have turned out differently. While social movement theorists refer to Costa as an 'issue entrepreneur' (Hertel, 2006), this anodyne description does not do justice to how far out of line her action was in facilitating the NBC *Dateline* reporters, which led to her abandonment by the church authorities and placed her in direct fear for her life. On reflection, given that the situation for child labour in Bangladesh is currently reported to be as bad now as it was in the early 1990s, it may

have been better for researchers to focus less on the plight of the workers and more on the role of the elite in seeking to maintain their social position by maintaining Bangladesh as the ‘Wal-Mart’ of international suppliers (Gilbert, 2018, 49). Gilbert argues that a “community of complicity” operates amongst the elite which with a nod and a wink, chooses to ignore formal agreements. He mentions the reply of RMG owner Sabur to the question as to whether he had implemented his 5% fund yet (the fund was established following the Rana Plaza disaster to set aside profits for employee welfare)? Sabur responded ironically, to general laughter, “Of course not! How would I live?!”⁷⁹¹

The Corporation and its Responsibilities

An important point arising from earlier discussion in this chapter is that indeterminacy as to what a corporation is and what it ought to be, what its responsibilities are and who should be to blame when things go wrong, provides fuel for academic debate and feeds a lucrative industry for corporate ethicists to peddle their wares. The mainstream argument famously argued for by Friedman (1980) is that the corporation is a separate legal person whose executives are agents whose aim is to maximise the utility of its owners such that, ‘shareholder value has become the ethic by which executives construe and judge their own conduct’. (Roberts, 2005, 254).

Edward Freeman (1984) offered an alternative vision which, while agreeing that the satisfaction of shareholders is indeed a key responsibility for executives, argued that corporations should also cater to the interests of those others who have an important stake in its operations, such as employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, government and civil society. At a superficial level in relation to the foregoing discussion of child labour in Bangladesh, the attitude and behaviour of Wal-Mart may seem generally to conform to Friedman’s (1980) prescription whereas the actions of Levi-Strauss in arranging schooling for underage workers and for helping resolve the dispute at Beximco may be more compatible with Freeman (1984).

The explanation is not quite so simple. Quick to mention that it was the author of the first ever set of General Sourcing and Operating Guidelines in 1991, Levi Strauss & Co. was for obvious reasons coy to describe the reason why. Serving as guard-rails for engagement with suppliers overseas the guidelines combine word-play that allows for ‘wriggle room’ with specifics. The guidelines are elastic in stating the desire to work with businesses that, ‘aspire as individuals and in the conduct of all their businesses to a set of ethical standards *not incompatible* with our own”. This is followed by specific statements that Levi-Strauss will not work with businesses that hire children under 15 years old, use forced labour, administer corporal punishment, or have working hours in excess of sixty hours per week, and will engage with those that pay wages which meet ‘prevailing industry standards’ and permit freedom of association. While the general ethical statement allows sufficient leeway that one could drive a tractor through it, the specifics had sufficient real-world traction in 1992 when they were minted, to stimulate Levi Strauss employees to respond to the discovery of underage children in two factories

⁷⁹¹ Gilbert, (2018, 52).

by establishing schools, stipends and teaching materials for children. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, during my visit to Bangladesh in 2004, I learned that Levi-Strauss had acted positively by stepping in to mediate a dispute involving workers at Beximco. More recently, in the same year that Levi-Strauss at last signed a binding agreement to recognize workers' rights in Pakistan, the corporation was criticised for failing to uphold workers' rights in Turkey.⁷⁹²

Given the above patchy record there is seems little support for the idea that Levi-Straus & Co. did anything other than seek to maintain its brand image and profitability. Given the importance of brand meaning in the formulation of the identity of the generally youthful "opinionated and savvy"⁷⁹³ segment of customers in the early 1990s, one might have expected that Levi-Strauss would have done everything possible to maintain a positive image in the face of accusations of using child labour in the manufacture of its clothing.

Another aspect of the Bangladesh case is how the spotlight quickly shifted from focusing on the actions of Wal-Mart and onto anti-child labour activists. This is to an extent not surprising, as the most ready access to researchers in that case was provided by activists, whilst Wal-Mart and other corporates maintained a low profile and stayed well below the radar. It is clear that cost-competitiveness was, and is, of paramount importance to these corporations, especially for "value" brands, and that cost pressures have had a depressing effect on wages in the sector. In which light archival study of communications between corporations, the BGMEA and governments would shed a lot more light on this complex case.⁷⁹⁴

Questions of Accountability

This chapter also raised the important question of accountability. Robert Dahl was concerned to rein in the self-serving behaviour of the corporate elite and his prescription which was to introduce workplace democracy, which was considered radical then, would no doubt be greeted with astonishment by apparatchiks of the Trump-47 regime. There is however a precedent, as since the enactment of the Mitbestimmungsgesetz in 1976, German workers have had formal authority in corporate decision-making, so it should be possible to discover whether this involvement has had a beneficial effect on corporate behaviour. Although it was long believed that this structure provided for more enlightened decisions than would otherwise have been the case, this presumption was seriously challenged following the emissions scandal that enveloped Volkswagen and a number of other corporations in 2015, which indicated that corporate boards had superficially

⁷⁹² Clean Clothes Campaign, (2024). Trail of broken promises: Levi's denies justice to unlawfully fired workers in Türkiye. Clean Clothes Campaign, (2024). After years of pressure Levi's commits to protecting workers in Pakistan.

⁷⁹³ Holt (2002, 85).

⁷⁹⁴ In relation to this I was provided some useful archival material from Levi-Strauss in relation to events in the early 1990s, although there was unfortunately no record of meetings with the BGMEA nor with government officials or NGOs.

complied with what was required by law but had grossly failed to effectively supervise and monitor operations⁷⁹⁵.

Where do the authority, responsibility and accountability of the corporation lie? Friedman (1970) had argued that managerial authority derives from the shareholders who own the business. Contributors to the literature on business ethics on the other hand contend that corporations own themselves because, as corporate assets are separate from those of shareholders, so directors are only agents of, and responsible to, the legal entity of the corporation.⁷⁹⁶ Below I outline a third argument based on Hobbes presented by Mansell, (2025), that the corporation is simultaneously a separate legal entity and is authorised by the collective assembly of shareholders who are responsible for the action of its managers.

Mansell, (2025) first clarifies the role of the state in relation to the corporation, by countering the argument that corporate actions are authorised by the citizens of the state. He cites Hobbes, for whom the sovereign can only represent the overall public interest and not the private interest of the corporation. Rather, through issuance of a charter, the state gives permission to the future shareholders of the corporation which enables them to incorporate.

Mansell next clarifies the relation of the directors and employees of the corporation to its shareholders. A common argument is that because they do not own corporate assets, shareholders cannot be principals and even if they were, directors would not be their agents, because shareholders have no power to control their actions. Here Mansell notes that Hobbes likens the relation of the citizen to the state authority to that of the shareholder to the business corporation, to argue that,

Hobbes accepts both premises: citizens or shareholders do not own the assets of a state or business corporation, and they have bestowed control on a representative who may delegate that authority to a government or board of directors. However, neither premise leads to the conclusion that the representative has no obligation to serve the citizens' or shareholders' interests.

If one accepts the above, then is the responsibility of the shareholder as a principal? Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit separately assert from a civic republican stance that authors ought to be responsible for the actions of those who represent them, the implication being that shareholders should carry the can for misdemeanours carried out in their name by corporate executives. The corporation is a hierarchical entity and the directors that form its executive are authorised by the assembly of shareholders at its AGM to act as their representatives. Directors then hire general managers, who in turn recruit lower-level employees, such that those in more senior positions are morally responsible for the actions of their subordinates.

⁷⁹⁵ Sharpe, (2017).

⁷⁹⁶ Mansell (2025) includes a quote from Phillips, (2003), "who would own the corporation if it bought back its own stock?" This is pertinent because earlier I mentioned that this is a common practice that is ostensibly used by managers to boost their remuneration.

Mansell refers to Fleming (2020, who distinguishes the “nominal responsibility” that comes from ownership, from culpability, or blame, which attaches to the one who intended the wrongful action. Ownership can be incurred vicariously, while culpability cannot, because intent cannot be transferred from a representative to a representee (ibid. 2020, 101). Mansell offers the example that if an employee commits fraud against a customer, the blame is not attributable to the employer unless they have been complicit. By extension, although the ownership of a decision by shareholders can be laid on the shoulders of each of its members, unless every shareholder voted for it, moral blame or culpability cannot.

Mansell then asks if one can blame shareholders for acts of corporate wrongdoing they were unaware of or that were committed in the past? To my mind this summons the troubling issue of slavery and lest we forget, slavery is not a thing of the past but is very much with us today. Mansell offers two reasons from Pasternak (2021), pertaining to situations when individuals might be blamed; on the basis of their association with the organisation; or if they benefitted from the wrongdoing. He mentions that in the case of the state, remedies may involve compensation, rehabilitation and ‘reparative measures’. In the corporate realm he cites the example of the British Petroleum *Deepwater Horizon* disaster which placed a similar collective duty on the corporation’s shareholders, as the estimated \$61.6 billion in costs were drawn from shareholder equity.

The paper by Mansell (2025), contributes to the ongoing debate on governance and accountability in the rarified subject area of business ethics that seem remote from the trials and challenges of everyday life. From the standpoint of political process theory, Mansell’s argument and those like it, offer a potential resource for the issue entrepreneur who is alert to opportunities that may arise when the current system fails and who develops a mobilising structure around such arguments to present a challenge to the legitimacy of the prevailing system and to disrupt the balance of interests surrounding the status quo. This is more or less the explanation offered by Davis and Thompson (1994), for the emergence of the shareholder rights movement in the 1980s when the prevailing system of corporate governance had broken down because executives tried to sideline the interests of shareholders by introducing “poison pills” and by lobbying US state governments to enact legislation against hostile takeovers. The authors argue that resentment by shareholders was mobilised by issue entrepreneurs who constructed effective mobilising structures for action to rein in executive pay and to prevent executive action to forestall takeovers, in the ideological climate of the Reagan regime that was favourable to the interests of shareholders. While no social movement has as yet developed to press for the accountability of shareholders, the general aims of the interest group Corporate Accountability seem to make it a potentially good fit for such arguments.⁷⁹⁷

Mansell’s (2025) mention of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill illustrates that very occasionally, public outcry over an issue can result in swift action. The oil spill from the Exxon Valdez in 1989 was one such moment, spurring the US Congress to ratify the Oil

⁷⁹⁷ Corporate Accountability. <https://corporateaccountability.org/what-we-do/>

Pollution Act in the same year, stipulating that the ‘polluter pays’ and requiring Exxon to pay \$900 million to a restoration trust fund, followed by in 2010 by the \$8.8 billion paid by British Petroleum as redress for the *Deepwater Horizon* spill.⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁹⁸ US Government Accountability Office,(GAO). (2019). *30 Years after Exxon Valdez, 9 Years after Deepwater Horizon: What We Found*. 21st March. In relation to Deepwater Horizon, it was reported that President Obama wanted to know “whose ass to kick” in connection with the crisis and the US Justice Department put pressure on BP to drop its dividend. (Bleiweiss, S., (2010) UK feels backlash from BP oil spill: the view from Europe. *The Atlantic*, 11th June.

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Chapter Seven: The Second Dimension of Power

Introduction

While Dahl (1961) found no evidence to support the view that the political field is dominated by an elite, for Bachrach and Baratz (1962), that is not the end of the story as Dahl did not consider a second, hidden face of power, where issues that are in B's interests, but not in A's, simply do not arise for discussion. As they put it,

... power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences. (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962: 948).

They offer the example of a discontented academic who in the privacy of his office decides that at the next School meeting he is going to confront the Head of School, 'but when the moment of truth arrives, he sits frozen in silence'.⁷⁹⁹ They suggest several putative reasons for the academic's inaction; he is fearful of being thought disloyal to the School; he feels that he would be in a minority, or that his views will be 'pigeon-holed', or sat on permanently. Or perhaps, as I have heard from colleagues, he has been privately warned off by colleagues that it would be unwise for him to stick his head over the parapet? Just as an academic Head of School enjoys considerable power, so community politics in the USA can still be dominated by wealthy, predominantly white, citizens whose interests are quite different to those from the poor who shun participation in the political process. The cynical response from some commentators might be that this is simply a matter of choice; the system is neutral and so the poor have every right to engage in the political process but choose not to. Bachrach and Baratz argue to the contrary that the non-response of the poor can better be understood as a means to perpetuate the interests of the wealthy. By focusing purely on overt conflict and actual disagreement between A and B, Dahl failed to account for a second dimension of power which operates in favour of A, through non-decision making.⁸⁰⁰

Non-Decisionmaking

As the name implies, non-decisionmaking is concerned more with what fails to happen than what does. Bachrach and Baratz distinguish non-decisions, which are individual and discrete, from non-decision*making*, which describes the systematic process engaged in by agents who actively create, or shape, a mobilization of bias to preserve the status quo such that,

⁷⁹⁹ Bachrach & Baratz, (1962: 949).

⁸⁰⁰ Bachrach & Baratz, (1962: 950).

All forms of political organization have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because organization is *the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics whilst others are organized out.⁸⁰¹

Power infuses the mobilization of bias which maintains this unfair division of benefits, consisting of norms and procedures, ‘that operate...in favour of the expression of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others.’⁸⁰² Nondecision making can involve a number of techniques to preserve a particular version of the status quo, ranging from intimidation and force against those who seek to change the system, to more subtle covert means. Dahl’s decision-making model fails to take account of this by focusing purely on interactions between actors and so takes norms as given. For Bachrach and Baratz, shaping norms is central to power, which, ‘is not exercised so much by those who make decisions or make agendas but by those who direct their energy in shaping or reinforcing the predominant norms and myths that underpin the political process.’⁸⁰³

Overt and Covert Non-Decisionmaking

Bachrach and Baratz (1975) argue that to describe non decisionmaking as covert control is too broad and also too narrow. It is too broad, because one-dimensional power can also be exercised covertly. Covert strategies may be used to avoid an issue arising (non decisionmaking) or to assure victory (decision making).

A recent case of the use of covert and overt power, albeit not in the context of marketing, illustrates how Donald Trump managed to obtain substantial damages for a lawsuit many considered to be without merit and to have a satirist removed who had been a constant thorn in his side. This complex case tied the fortunes of the media giants Paramount, CBS and Skydance to those of two individuals, Stephen Colbert and Donald Trump, although in this context, it is more fitting to fit Trump to his institutional role as President of the USA.

The background was that Paramount Global, owner of broadcaster CBS, posted its intention to merge with Skydance Media for a return to shareholders of \$8 billion. Then, following an interview by CBS “Sixty Minutes” news team with Vice-President Kamala Harris in the run-up to the 2024 Presidential election, candidate Donald Trump issued a lawsuit against Paramount Global, owners of CBS, claiming damages of \$16 million alleging that the interview with Harris had harmed his campaign. It was commented at the time that Trump’s case was baseless, as “Sixty Minutes” had followed traditional journalistic practice. Trump also declined an invitation from CBS for an interview, accusing the programme of bias. Following Trump’s election to the Presidency, Federal

⁸⁰¹ Quotation attributed to Professor Schattschneider, (Bachrach & Baratz, 949). Italics in original.

⁸⁰² Bachrach & Baratz, (1962: 949).

⁸⁰³ This has particular significance today as I write this in early August 2024 when, spurred on by false propaganda, thousands of the disaffected in Britain and Northern Ireland rampaged through the streets burning the homes and businesses of immigrants, Muslims and others the mob considered “unpatriotic”.... As I re-write this in June 2025, another mob in Ballymena burns out immigrants whilst the drug barons who stirred up this sentiment looked on contented. Re-visiting this for a third time in August, English and Scottish nationalists have taken to copying the Northern Irish by hoisting their national flag on every available lamppost.

approval for the merger between Paramount Global and Skydance failed to appear. On the 18th June 2025, Trump said he supported the deal, “but went on to talk about his lawsuit against Paramount, apparently linking the two”.⁸⁰⁴ Not long after this, Paramount Global, which had earlier described Trump’s action as a nuisance lawsuit ‘without merit’, paid Trump the \$16 million dollars he had claimed in damages, which was widely reported to have then “cleared the way” for the Trump administration to approve the delayed sale of Paramount to Skydance.

The saga did not end there as, “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” was one of the most popular CBS programmes in its time-slot. Shortly after Paramount made the payment to Trump, Colbert, a long-time Trump critic, referred to it on air as “a big fat bribe” and cited reports that once the merger was complete, Skydance might seek to please Trump by getting rid of Colbert (Trump had once labelled him “no talent Stephen Colbert”). And indeed just a few days later, Paramount announced the cancellation of “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert”. The reason given was ostensibly on financial grounds, which seemed curious, as Colbert’s was the top-rated show in its time-slot. Just before the Paramount-Skydance deal was approved, Trump had written on social media, “I just love that Colbert got fired”. Jon Stewart pointed to a more serious issue surrounding this, of a spreading “fear and compliance that is gripping all of America’s institutions at this very moment”.⁸⁰⁵ Not long after the furore over Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, another broadcaster who had attracted Trump’s ire was removed for a time from his satirical programme.⁸⁰⁶

Bachrach and Baratz argue that to describe non-decisionmaking as covert is too narrow because it omits consideration of overt acts such as the co-optation of opponents, or rejection of the legitimacy of demands for change.⁸⁰⁷ Covertly, A may seek to persuade those in pivotal positions who frame the agenda for discussion, that the harm to B’s interests from A’s action is minimal and so persuade them to steer discussion towards issues that are innocuous to A. Or, if the actions do make it onto the agenda, then A may delay the outcome by tying B up in endless requests for clarification. Alternatively, B may recognize A’s vastly superior resources and decide that it is simply not worth contesting the issue. This is similar to the concept of learned helplessness; once a person has tried and failed to change a situation against overwhelming odds, one may simply give up.

Finally, A can dominate B without B becoming aware of this through the mobilization of bias. This relates to the degree of control that A has over the political process and the flow of information that influences the beliefs and opinions of less powerful groups to

⁸⁰⁴ Paulson, K. (2025). *What you need to know about Trump’s settlement with Paramount*. Free Speech Center, Middle Tennessee State University, 2nd July.

⁸⁰⁵ Quotes are from Grimes, C. (2025). Paramount’s \$8bn. sale to Skydance after his ousting raises concerns about politics in US media. *Financial Times*, 26th/27th July, 11. The relevant Stephen Colbert show may still be available to view on Youtube.

⁸⁰⁶ Youngs, I. & K. Razzall (2025), US TV hosts back Kimmel as Trump threatens networks. *BBC News*, 19th September.

⁸⁰⁷ Bachrach & Baratz, (1975, 901).

enable the elite to effectively determine not only whether certain demands are to be expressed but also whether those demands will even enter peoples' minds. Today a real problem for social cohesion has been created since the rapid growth of social media where many subscribe to podcasts in information silos where presenters attune their content to the preferences of their audiences by channeling sharply contrasting and often biased versions of reality. Members of the same family, or friends living in the same apartment, can consequently inhabit very different media realities. For instance, in the USA, democratic voters who proportionately favour mainstream broadcast media will recently have witnessed brutal actions by the Trump regime in dispatching Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and the National Guard to cities such as New York and Chicago, whilst 'MAGA' republicans, who distrust those they label as "legacy media" apart from Fox News, Newsmax, Tucker Carlson and Breitbart, are more likely to be drawn to narrowcasts which depict historical scenes of rioting which are presented as current events, coupled to warnings of an imminent insurrection by an "Antifa" conspiracy fuelled by the Trump administration designation of this mythical organization⁸⁰⁸ as a terrorist threat.⁸⁰⁹

Conscious and Unconscious Power

For Bachrach and Baratz, 'to the extent that a person or group consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power.'⁸¹⁰ They also recognise the "impact of indirect relations in which communication between the power wielder and power receiver is wholly or partly obstructed". In the context of consumption, it was once argued that although the lifestyle enjoyed by 'northern' consumers can cause harm to those who are suborned as indentured labour into the cocoa or coffee trades, and others who labour in sweatshops, as well as the millions living in Africa and Asia who drown in a sea of rotting waste exported from the 'global north', that these practices are largely hidden, so the fault should be laid at the door of industry and government, as consumers themselves are largely unaware of these and of other egregious practices.

Can it really be the case that, in light of years of broadcasting of 'behind the scenes' documentaries modelled on *NBC Dateline*, discussed in chapter six, to assert that consumers aren't aware of the harms done in their name? A 2023 report found that although 78 percent of US consumers supported corporate environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives, companies launching new products experienced sales well-below expectations. Delving further into behavioural data, the researchers found that

⁸⁰⁸ "Antifa" is not an organisation but is the label used to describe a dispersed social movement that consists of a number of heterogeneous groupings.

⁸⁰⁹ Shearer, E., K. Eddy, M. Lipka, & K.E. Matsa, (2025). The Political Gap in Americans' News Sources, Exploring use of and trust in 30 sources across U.S. political lines. *Pew Research Center*, 10th June. The White House, (2025). Designating Antifa as a domestic terrorist organization, 22nd September.

⁸¹⁰ Bachrach & Baratz, (1975, 904).

products that made ESG claims had averaged 28 percent cumulative growth compared to 20 percent for those that did not make such a claim.⁸¹¹

Academic research in this area has largely been informed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explore the gap that exists between a person's positive attitudes towards ethical behaviour and their actual behaviour.⁸¹² In one study, which explored why professedly 'ethical' individuals leave their morals at the door of the supermarket, the authors conclude that this can result as a consequence of the need to reduce the disconcerting dissonance that can be experienced when a person's abstract belief in fair trade is countered in the actual purchase situation by factors such as the range of choice, the relative price, (as fair trade goods trade at a premium), and the perceived quality of the goods on offer.⁸¹³ Some informants told the researchers that although they were generally in favour of fair trade, that this is a systemic issue and they are just a tiny cog in a very big wheel. Dissonance reduction was also a strategy employed by informants to Carrington et al., (2020) which questioned them about modern slavery and their potential role in perpetuating and/or eradicating this. As with fair trade, informants sought to neutralise this as a problem, for instance, by denying the victimhood of the victim, or denying that the victim had suffered an injury; or if they accepted this, denying their personal responsibility for such situations. More stridently, some condemned those who condemned such practices, while finally, some appealed to higher loyalties. Informants also engaged in what the authors call the politics of legitimisation, by seeking to reduce the moral significance of modern slavery and thus normalising their indifference. One informant adopted bluntly likened his relation to enslaved labour to a cost-benefit analysis, that although slavery caused "problems", those enslaved worked to his benefit. Others displaced their responsibility onto the parents of child slaves by arguing that they 'pimped' their children out because they themselves were too lazy to work.

It is important that this study constituted a small sample of just forty individuals. That said it could be argued that there is little new in the dismal picture of humanity described above, given such failings were described by the ancients in their religious texts. But of course science can take nothing for granted and so everything must be discovered anew! By focusing on dissonance and the preservation of identity and narrow self-interest, the study offers a psychological perspective on the second face of power which suggests that identity and the self-preservation of imputed interest are common to the behaviour of individuals and of organisations.

J.K. Galbraith: Marketing and the Revised Sequence

It is useful to turn to the work of the economist J.K. Galbraith given the affinity between his concept of conditioned power and the second face of power described by Bachrach and Baratz (1962). Moreover, although non-decisionmaking can help explain the actions

⁸¹¹ McKinsey, (2023). *Consumers care about sustainability - and back it up with their wallets*, 6th Feb. One wonders about the situation today in 2025.

⁸¹² Azjen, (1991).

⁸¹³ Chatzidakis et al. (2007).

of corporations and industries that have fought long, hard and sometimes viciously, to sustain their business model when they know that this is doing harm to consumers, Galbraith's argument, which was influenced by Thorstein Veblen's (1899) *Theory of the Leisure Class*, focuses more directly on the context of business and marketing. In *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith (1958), argued that demand is the outcome of production and not the other way round and in *The New Industrial State* (1967), he extended his attack on the presumption of consumer sovereignty, by claiming that the 'revised sequence' is a better explanation for real conduct in the marketplace. In so doing, Galbraith aligned with Veblen who had written in 1923 of the "fabrication of customers' by "publicity engineers"⁸¹⁴ thus reversing the mainstream presumption that business is subservient to the whims of sovereign consumers and that in practice, consumers are largely submissive to the interests of firms. Understood in this way the marketing provides as a useful fiction to disguises the real operation of power in the market.

Galbraith (1967) argued that such was the concentration of economic power in the hands of those who controlled the corporate landscape that one could no longer think of individual corporate actors, but rather of a self-serving technocratic elite, the technostructure.⁸¹⁵ This idea is similar to Weber's idea of a machine bureaucracy, comprising an ill-defined entity that enfolds a range of processes from specialized knowledge to group decision-making.⁸¹⁶ Galbraith's argument was in tune with that of C. Wright Mills, who warned of the threat posed by the centralisation of information and of the power amassed by an elite group of politicians, business moguls and the heads of the military who occupied, "the strategic command posts of the social structure".⁸¹⁷ While Dawson (2005) expands on Veblen and Galbraith to argue that marketing acts as a vehicle of class coercion between business and the public, I should mention that Bachrach and Baratz (1962) did not hold to the idea that society is controlled by a self-serving elite and instead subscribed to Robert Dahl's pluralist argument that power relations comprise shifting coalitions of interest.

Galbraith's definition of power is similar to that of Dahl as the exercise of one's will on others, such that the greater the imposition of the will, the greater the power. He goes further than Dahl to argue that some uses of power depends on concealment and that B's submission is not always evident to those who render it. He describes three instruments for wielding power comprising condign, compensatory and conditioned power. Condign power consists of the application of force by A which is sufficiently unpleasant to lead B to abandon their preferences. For instance, in the case of the MacDonald's lawsuit against London Greenpeace, the threatened legal action by the former led three members of the latter to abandon their position and apologize. While condign power is a negative

⁸¹⁴ See Dawson (2005, 14) Quote from from Veblen, T. (1964 [1923]) *Absentee ownership and business enterprise in recent times: the case of America*, Augustus M. Kelley,, 309-310)

⁸¹⁵ Some today are turning back to Mills to argue that in today's climate elites have hollowed out social institutions in the drive for profit-making opportunities and in doing so have shredded rules and programmes that once offered basic protections for all citizens (Gautney, 2023).

⁸¹⁶ Source: Galbraith, 1967: 85/86.

⁸¹⁷ Mills (1956, 3-4, in Lukes, (2021, 6).

instrument, compensatory power is positive, based on the offer of a reward or inducement of some kind. While condign and compensatory power are consistent with a one-dimensional understanding of power, conditioned power is similar to the mobilization of bias described by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and indeed to Lukes, (1974) third dimension of power, as it is exercised by influencing a person's beliefs through persuasion, education or social commitment as to what seems to be proper and right, which causes the individual to submit to the will of others without them necessarily being aware that they are doing so. Submission takes place in this instance because this seems the right and natural thing to do and so the fact of submission is not recognized.

Galbraith cites as examples of conditioned power, the role played by formal education in the transmission of 'acceptable codes' through the family, schools and universities which seek to create submission to group values such as 'patriotism' or the virtues of 'free enterprise' that are taken for granted as the right way to think of one's country and the functioning of the economic system. In relation to marketing he singles out the role played by advertising in bringing the buyer to a belief in the purposes of the seller as a form of submission, who; "submits to the will of the purveyor of the beer, cigarettes, detergent or political purpose" (Galbraith, 1984: 30).⁸¹⁸

Galbraith describes three sources of power based on personality, property, and organization. In the modern era personal power has not so much been directed to force others through condign power but rather to instil beliefs through conditioned power. He suggests that there are many ways in which property and wealth enables some to gain the submission of others, arguing that advertising is a central tool used by marketers to win the submission of customers. However, this depends on the prior effectiveness of organization to secure the submission of employees, particularly full-time employees, and most especially the most senior employees, in the pursuance of corporate goals,

'No senior executive would presume to suggest that the cigarettes his company makes cause cancer, that its automobiles are unsafe, that its pharmaceuticals are medically suspect. Or that some political initiative sought by the company – improvement of competition allowances or the reduction of foreign competition, is in conflict with the public interest' (Galbraith, 1984: 59).

Here Galbraith anticipates a difficulty with Kotler's (1972) societal marketing concept, mentioned in chapters three and eight, by which may fall at the first hurdle, as it rests fundamentally on the presumption that executives will be receptive to the discovery that their products can cause harm to consumers or others and will act promptly to remedy such harm. As discussed below, this presumption has been refuted time and again in situations where executives have done precisely the opposite, by digging in and holding on regardless of the consequences. If senior managers tend to avoid such uncomfortable considerations for reasons of self-interest and the avoidance of dissonance, what hope is there for the lowly whistleblower to gain a respectful hearing?

Galbraith's view of power is systemic in that it holds that modern society is in equilibrium between those who exercise power and those who counter it. In this view the usual and

⁸¹⁸ This argument has resonances to Althusser's explanation of the transmission of ideology through Ideological State Apparatuses such as the church, the school and the family.

most effective response to an unwelcome exercise of power is to build a countervailing power. For example, if sellers overcharge then buyers will come together with other buyers to boycott or bargain. In modern societies, he argues, it is the state that acts as the arbiter of power. Different groups in society seek the support of the state in winning the submission of others or to resist the power of others. The state regulates condign power. It also regulates forms of compensatory power such as the use of bribes or kickbacks. In the USA particularly, the state guarantees the use of conditioned power through the exercise of “freedom of speech”.

In discussing the exercise of power in contemporary society Galbraith refers his reader to Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and to Malthus, Ricardo and Bentham, as particularly influential in socially conditioning those who rule the state to a belief in industrial capitalism. Thus, Bentham’s argument for utilitarianism representing ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ seemed best adapted to Smith’s policy of ‘laissez-faire’, which equates the pursuit of economic self-interest with the public good. Galbraith comments that it would be hard to think of any idea so serviceable to industrial power. In this view the actions of industrialists are rendered ultimately virtuous ‘by an overriding law to which he, however selfish or sordid his purpose or motivations, was wholly subject’.⁸¹⁹

Referring to those who proselytised the operation of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ in the ‘free market’, Galbraith argued that to use this terminology was risible given the lack of competition between corporations in the 1950s and 1960s, when massive corporate power was concentrated in the hands of a few oligopolists. This was especially so given that Smith had argued for the operation of free market competition as an alternative to the almost overwhelming power of the mercantile system that prevailed in his own day. For Galbraith, the deployment of Smith’s rhetoric in such a cynical manner operated as a powerful tool for corporations to fool the public into believing that competition still prevailed. Tracing the lineage of the disappearance of competition from the economy, Galbraith argued that capitalism first grew on the back of powerful personalities such as Carnegie, and Rockefeller, who controlled vast enterprises which in time passed over to the technostructure presided over by management technocrats. This class comprised a vast managerial bureaucracy that subverted the operation of the marketplace by placing its own interests over those of shareholders and of customers. The main aim of the technostructure was to ensure its own survival free from control by either customer or stockholder.⁸²⁰ Through compensatory power these industrialists bought off legislators and consumers. It sought to ensure that consumers bought what was available at whatever price it determined and additionally that stockholders received a return adequate or enough for them not to wish to rock the boat.⁸²¹ The need to manage both aggregate and specific demand was due to the ability through increased technology and operational efficiencies to produce very large volumes.

⁸¹⁹ Source: Galbraith, (1984: 113)

⁸²⁰ Source: Galbraith, (1967): based on chapters 15-19, 34 & 35.

⁸²¹ There is similar to arguments leading to the formation of the shareholder rights movement which are discussed in chapter six.

By proposing the 'revised sequence', Galbraith challenged the 'accepted sequence' proposed by the marketing concept, that all needs start with consumers, whose choices send signals to producers who are responsive to these. The revised sequence refers instead to the situation where producers condition the creation and satisfaction of needs and wants in the interests of the technostructure. Advertising is especially important to Galbraith's explanation, as there is a need to create a ready market for the goods on offer. In response to the riposte that much advertising is informational, Galbraith replied sardonically that, 'Only a gravely retarded person would need to be told that the American Tobacco Company has cigarettes for sale'.

The presumption that the marketplace is dominated by *homo economicus*, that individual rational agent, utility maximizer and originator of his needs, supposes any interference with the expressed preferences of this sovereign individual is unwarranted. As a result, any public objections to lethal automobile design, disabling drugs, disfiguring beauty aids or high-calorie reducing compounds are interpreted as constituting interference with the individual's design for maximizing his satisfaction and with the resulting economic response. This provides a powerful protection for the technostructure which hides behind the rhetoric of the sovereign individual as a cover for its wholesale manipulation of the marketplace. As a result everything from retail strip developments; industrial farms; air and river pollution is justified on the basis of the rhetoric of 'freedom of individual choice'.⁸²²

What solutions did Galbraith offer to this abuse of power wielded by the technostructure? Back in the 1960s he argued that this must be broken to ensure a safer basis for underwriting technology, the expansion of socially useful services and the emancipation of education. He suggested that there was no point in looking to the state for this, as there was an 'increasingly artificial and indistinct' line drawn between the technostructure and the state. Rather he saw the intellectual community as the vanguard of this change. This is because he believed that at that time (in the 1960s) there was a strong and independent sense of academic freedom of intellectuals in the USA which was not constrained by bureaucracy nor compromised through reliance on the technostructure.

Galbraith's ideas were influential throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s when the vision of an omniscient elite binding the 'technostructure' to the 'Military-Industrial-Complex' inflamed youthful imaginings and formed a rallying ground for countercultural striving. At around the time of the millennium the Bilderberg group appeared as the incarnation of the technostructure, depending on one's viewpoint as either providing a chance for the elite to discuss pressing global issues away from the media spotlight, or alternatively, as a shadowy malign presence aiming towards world domination. If anything, fears of a hidden oppressive and unaccountable elite are even more pressing today amongst those who lurk in social media echo-chambers such as Q-Anon. Nowadays the sheer size and scope of corporations and the influence of the individuals who run them is much greater than it was in Galbraith's day. 'Global' and 'anti-capitalist' protestors take aim at the perceived non-accountable actions of the transnational elite formed by those working for the European Union, the G7, World Bank and other powerful interests. While the Bilderberg group may be a conspiracy theorist's dream, and while, as discussed in chapter four there are actually are conspiracies, one might conjecture that

⁸²² Source: Galbraith, (1967: 210).

any attempt to control the global economy in the era of ‘post-Fordism’ and the ‘electronic herd’ will be doomed to failure. Likewise, if history is anything to go by, the corporate behemoths that strut the global stage today will one day succumb to the creative destruction of the market; just two of corporations from the top ten listed in Galbraith’s time are here today.⁸²³ On the other hand as discussed in chapter four, powerful vested interests continue to exert influence behind the scenes.

Galbraith was taken to task for his argument that marketing creates false needs and for other misdemeanours.⁸²⁴ And, while there is something to be said for it his idea of a ‘revised sequence’ greatly exaggerates the true state of affairs as it is acceptable for production decisions to anticipate consumer demands, and while a customer may be led to a product, they are not obliged to buy it. Reckoned to be in real terms, the most expensively researched product ever developed and backed by a massive advertising blitz the Ford *Edsel* fell flat once launched because the style became unfashionable in the period between conception and launch. Galbraith tended to reinforce the collusive operations of corporate power while neglecting that of consumers to deviate from those intentions. However, just because consumers have choice, it scarcely follows that corporate collusion to withhold relevant information from them, deceive them or to seek to skew their opinions on issues of vital importance, is in any way acceptable.

Researching Non-Decisionmaking

Given that non-decisionmaking is about what fails to happen, then how is one to research what fails to occur? In response to criticism, Bachrach and Baratz (1975) stated, ‘(e)mpirical verification is much to be desired but it is not foremost in importance’,⁸²⁵ - which is not very encouraging to the would-be researcher! They do however offer tips as to how to research the mobilization of bias, which they assume occurs in an institutional context. One should first consider, “the dominant values, myths, established political procedures and rules of the game”, and then discern which groups gain from the bias and which are handicapped by it, and finally, investigate the dynamics of nondecisionmaking.⁸²⁶

For Steven Lukes (2021, 50-53), Crenson’s (1971) study of the “un-politics” of power exemplifies research conducted from a two-dimensional perspective.⁸²⁷ The pluralist argument from Dahl would suggest that power relations are observable and that local politics should reflect the concerns of the population as a whole because the

⁸²³ Gans (2017). mentions that these were AT&T, General Motors, Standard Oil, IBM, Texaco, DuPont, Sears, General Electric, Gulf Oil, and Kodak. Gans, J. (2017). 50 Years Ago an Economist Worried About Unchecked Corporate Power. Here’s What His Theory Got Wrong. *Harvard Business Review*, 22nd August.

⁸²⁴ See Baudrillard, (1988) and Leiss, (1978). I discuss these briefly in chapter three of *Consuming Behaviour*, (Desmond, 2003) and on Consuming Needs and Values. Additionally, Trentmann, (2017) provides a good discussion of various faults in Galbraith’s argument.

⁸²⁵ Bachrach & Baratz, (1975, 904).

⁸²⁶ Bachrach & Baratz, 1962: 952).

⁸²⁷ See also Greer, (1974).

administration needs to accommodate a wide section of interests. In contrast, Crenson's study of pollution legislation in the two broadly equivalent cities of Gary and East Chicago, Indiana, demonstrated that power relations can be unobservable and that the administration can long ignore issues of public interest. Although both cities suffered similar problems with air pollution, East Chicago had introduced legislation to control this in 1949, but it was only in 1962 that those in Gary chose to do so. Given that this case is discussed further in the next chapter, to cut a rather long story short, it should suffice to mention here Crenson's argument that although US Steel publicly remained silent on this issue, its massive presence in Gary acted as a dead weight against activists, such that for many years pollution was a "non-issue" for discussion.

The Super-Rich

The injunction by Bachrach and Baratz (1975) to consider the mobilisation of bias through "the dominant values, myths, established political procedures and rules of the game", brings to mind the section in chapter four, where the change in the narrative surrounding meritocracy in the neoliberal era is discussed. In its traditional usage meritocracy was more or less aligned with the Christian message that the poor in spirit will inherit the earth and the rich will find it hard not to be damned to the eternal flames. In the neoliberal era meritocracy was reversed to signify that the rich deserve the fruits of what is presumed to be their labour, whilst the poor are indolent and are deserving of their misery.

In terms of their argument to look to who wins and who loses, non-decisionmaking can serve the interests of the super-rich over those of the ordinary citizen in a number of ways. For instance, following the near-collapse of the international finance system following the GFC in 2008, politicians were vociferous in calling for the end of so-called tax-havens. Despite this, decades later, the system remains more or less in place. Whilst the financial transactions entered into by ordinary citizens are subjected to meticulous scrutiny, criminals from Russian oligarchs to Mexican cartels have laundered billions of stolen funds with impunity through European and American banks and the City of London.⁸²⁸ Russians who were sanctioned following the invasion of Ukraine were incredibly still allowed access to the UK courts. As mentioned in chapter six, in an episode that would have been farcical were it not true, Yevgeni Prigozhin head of the notorious Wagner Group, despite being under sanctions, was nonetheless permitted to take a SLAPP action suit for defamation against the award-winning Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat for alleging that Prigozhin was a member of Wagner!⁸²⁹

Sourcing Information

To reprise the above, non-decisionmaking involves keeping potential issues outside the political process. Where a decision is a choice amongst alternative modes of action, a

⁸²⁸ Vulliamy, E. (2011). How a big US bank laundered billions from Mexico's murderous drug gang. *The Observer*, 3rd. April. What is particularly striking is that as is often the case whistleblowers were punished.

⁸²⁹ Foreign Policy Centre (2023). Eliot Higgins, founder of Bellingcat, an open source news agency. <https://fpc.org.uk/eliot-higgins-founder-of-bellingcat-an-open-source-news-agency/>

non-decision is a decision that thwarts a challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker. There are *potential* issues which non-decision making prevents from becoming actual.⁸³⁰ A difficulty is how to discover evidence of non-decision making in marketing, given that precisely nothing happens as a result. Bachrach and Baratz (1975: 901) acknowledge that from an empirical perspective in relation to non decisionmaking, ‘the products of research may be impressionistic or ill-supported by data’.

While it seems obvious that it is easier to research contexts where decisions are made rather than where they are forestalled, huge amounts of previously hidden information have been made public. Much information has resulted from government investigations such as that pertaining to the notorious case of the Volkswagen Emissions scandal, discovered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; from lawsuits, such as that involving the Ford Pinto (Grimshaw vs. Ford Motor Co., 1981), and McDonald’s (London Greenpeace vs McDonalds, 1990); from investigations prompted by boycotts such as that of End Loans to South Africa (ELTSA) directed against Barclays Bank and the IMF, and that against Nestlé organized by *INFACT*, *IOCU*, the *New Internationalist* and *War on Want*; from concerned scientists such as Barbara Demeneix, or of Anthony Ingraffea, who turned against his own discovery; and last, but not least, from whistleblowers and those individuals who happened to be drawn to investigate matters by chance.

Whistleblowers

Much information that was previously hidden is now available in the public domain thanks to leaks from whistleblowers. Sheila Fitzpatrick observes that while the term “whistleblowing” was apparently coined by Ralph Nader as a more positive than ‘snitching’ or ‘informing’, to describe reports of abuses by corporations and government departments. Although it is effectively a form of denunciation that can be looked on askance, it has acquired a positive gloss, as whistleblowers risk retaliation for speaking out and are thus generally regarded as ‘brave, public spirited truth tellers’.⁸³¹ The most noteworthy and disturbing feature of cases of whistleblowing apart from the massive scale of expropriation, is indeed the mistreatment caused by corporate retaliation of whistleblowers, concerned citizens and lawyers who dare to challenge the status quo.⁸³² One of the biggest money laundering cases to date featured Wachovia Bank, owned by Wells Fargo, which was involved in laundering over \$378 billion. The bank got off lightly

⁸³⁰ Lukes, (2021: 27-28)

⁸³¹ Fitzpatrick, S. (2025) *Diary*, *London Review of Books*, 25th September, 44.

⁸³² Other prominent whistleblowers are Erin Bronkovich, who discovered that Pacific Gas & Electric had been poisoning the small town of Hinkley’s Water for over thirty years; Mark Whitacre, who exposed his company’s role in price-fixing; Jeffrey Wigand, who publicly stated that the tobacco industry had long been aware of the addictive properties of nicotine; Howard Wilkinson, who in 2018, reported on the \$238 billion laundering of oligarch assets by Danske Bank; Sharon Watkins, who exposed the Enron fraud in 2001/2; Cynthia Cooper, who exposed WorldCom; Antoine Deltour, who passed information on how Amazon and Dyson avoid tax liability; Osita Mba, who in 2011 exposed the ‘sweetheart’ deal between the UK tax authority and Goldman Sachs, and Michael Woodford, who exposed the \$1 billion fraud at Olympus. It is noteworthy that other forms of denunciation are controversial, as in Daniel Ellsberg’s leak of the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times and Washington Post in 1971, and Erick Snowden’s leak in 2013 to Wikileaks. Yet other are frowned upon as closer to ‘snitching’ especially when family are involved, as in the case of the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski who was informed on by his brother.

receiving a total fine that amounted to less than 2 percent of earnings. The whistleblower Martin Woods, a compliance officer employed by Wachovia, was first ignored and then threatened by senior management when he made them aware of the scandal. He subsequently stated that he felt he was, “the most toxic person in the bank”. Woods joined an exclusive club of whistleblowers, concerned citizens and lawyers whose lives became dominated and almost destroyed from the moment they took up arms against the might of corporate interests.

While there are literally hundreds of such instances, at time of writing a huge leak of internal documents revealed how Uber had avoided at least \$556 million in global taxes, operating behind the scenes in thirty countries, meeting with powerful politicians including Emmanuel Macron to change the laws regulating taxis in Uber’s favour, deceiving regulators and benefitting from violence against taxi drivers from 2013-2017.

Chance encounters by individuals

A good deal of material has also leaked into the public domain as the result of the action of individuals who simply hooked onto a particular issue that then came to dominate their lives. For instance, from his discovery of abnormalities in animals near Brofiscin quarry in Wales, veterinary surgeon Douglas Gowan began an investigation which found that Monsanto had used the quarry as a dump for manmade endocrine disruptors known as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), the “forever chemicals” we all now carry in our bodies. Des Wilson (1984) and Peter Taylor (1984) who wrote respectively of the dangers of lead poisoning, and the tobacco industry, were both journalists who became engrossed with the subject of their study.

Litigation

Although its power may be waning, for better or worse, we still live under the ‘Pax Americana’. The USA derives considerable power from the dollar which at time of writing continues, despite attempts to weaken it by the regime of Trump-47, to limp along as the world reserve currency, enabling the USA to sanction those it considers threatening to its interests. While it is a land of stark contrasts between rich and poor, executives can be sent to jail and class-action lawsuits have forced the tobacco industry amongst others, to reveal massive amounts of information they had previously kept hidden.

Academics often must rely at third hand on the analyses of documents released as the result of litigation, which can prove to be a daunting time-consuming task. For example, in the course of their research into the tobacco industry Mugli et al. (2001) trawled through 618 boxes of archive material, each of which held 2500 pages. Muggli adds that in on top of that British American Tobacco was ordered to provide further public access to its approximately eight million internal documents. Given its complexity, research into the tobacco industry can involve collaboration between activists and academics. For instance, the research by Rotman et al., (2022) included authors from Action for Smoking and Health (ASH) and the Tobacco Control Research Group.

Hactivism

A growing source of information is yielded as a consequence of action by hacktivists and citizen journalists, such as those involved in the releases by Wikileaks and the Panama Papers. Kevin Higgins of Bellingcat mobilised the ability of technology to geolocate actual events along with the power of citizen journalism to provide a detailed account of the sequence of events and the personnel involved in the shooting down of flight MH-17 in 2014 by Russian paramilitaries of the Donetsk People's Republic, as it flew over the Donbas, leading to the deaths of 298 people. Bellingcat, which has also investigated the illegal wildlife trade in the UAE, has now engaged in a wider project to train open source researchers and investigative journalists as part of its aim to protect democratic institutions.⁸³³

Other leaks that have gained widespread publicity include the highly publicised release of revelations by Eric Snowden by Wikileaks which revealed many illegal actions including notorious footage of a US helicopter attack in Iraq, and the publication of the *Panama Papers* by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Scientific Concern

Much of two-dimensional power in marketing contexts pertains to harms caused to consumers and third-parties that are not recognized by them as such. In similar manner to the ancient Romans who suffered the insidious effects of the lead in their water pipes, consumers are today subjected to a range of harms of which they either have no inkling or from which they have been distracted. Non-decisionmaking in the context of marketing is thus largely about how the system operates in a way that is innocuous to A that perpetuates harm done to some B who does not necessarily recognize this harm, or if they do, who considers it as innocuous to them.

Given the difficulty in gaining research access to business corporations at the best of times, third parties, such as scientists have proved to be invaluable sources of information. Scientific experts in the know communicate their concerns to policy makers and consumers about the harms done by the products we consume. For example, Barbara Demeneix (2017) has raised awareness amongst a relatively select group of specialists concerning the damage done to metabolic functioning by endocrine disruptors that amongst other applications have been found to be present in a range of everyday furnishings.

Exploring Two-Dimensional Power

Reflecting on the above, it is worth mentioning that academics in marketing and in consumer research are not trained to spot dangers that may be hidden in plain sight in products that have been extensively marketed as safe. Indeed there should be no reason for them to do so as scientific specialism is required to reveal a link between smoking and cancer (Doll, 1959), to spot the dangers posed by chemical pollutants in furniture

⁸³³ MH17 The Open Source Evidence A bellŕngcat Investigation. <https://www.bellingcat.com/app/uploads/2015/10/MH17-The-Open-Source-Evidence-EN.pdf>

(Demeneix, 2017), by consumption of ultra-processed foods (Spector, 2015), or most obviously, by including asbestos in talcum powder. On the other hand when such dangers are revealed and when industries then launch a programme of denial and obfuscation, the institutional response can be slow and it can often be left up to individual campaigners and journalists such as Des Wilson (1884) who pressed the case for lead-free petrol and Peter Taylor (1984), who take up the cudgels first on behalf of the public.

It is perhaps unsurprising that journalists on the lookout for a good story are likely to be amongst the first to understand the significance of scientific research and bring findings to the public understanding, for that after all, is their job. Additionally, one of the challenges of understanding power relations is that these are often tied to a specific context that is dynamic and which changes over time as avenues are closed and new openings arise. For example, it was described in the last chapter that the approach to SLAPP actions is quite different in the USA and the UK. The main aim of the SLAPP action by McDonald's against London Greenpeace in the 'McLibel' case was in line with non-decisionmaking as it was not to win damages from the defendants but to stifle dissent, in which they would have succeeded if Steel and Morris had joined the other three members of London Greenpeace and apologised to McDonald's.

Global Heating Inaction: A Social Movement Theory Account

While events on the ground are often complex and specific to a particular context, it is nevertheless important to gain some kind of general understanding in relation to important questions such as the suppression of discussion of global heating in the public square. Here the tripartite scheme devised by Doug McAdam which was briefly introduced in the chapter six can make a useful contribution. To recap, this involves analysing the political environment to identify opportunities and constraints; the organizational environment that operates as a base for mobilization; and finally the framing of the issue. McAdam (2017) illustrates this form of analysis by referring to successful non-decisionmaking in the USA in relation to the lack of action on global heating.

In describing the US political scene McAdam (ibid.) observes that successful social movements tend to arise when the regime of institutional power is benevolent and broadly receptive to their aims. He mentions as instances, the rise of progressive movements for labour reform and for civil and gender rights during the long period of governance by the Democratic Party from 1932 until 1968. In relation to action pertaining to global heating he notes that the political environment had been negative from 1988 and especially from 1994 when the Republican Party began to dominate the House from 1994 (you may recall that this also had a chilling effect on the passage of the Harkin Bill on child labour discussed in the last chapter). However, he notes too that a much longer and more significant trend that had been building from the 1960s and gained pace from the 1980s was a counter-shift towards the political right, which was bad news for action against global heating.

McAdam describes that when he was writing in 2017, polarisation in the US Congress had never been higher at any time since 1879, and additionally, that the 112th and 113th

Congressional sessions “earned the dubious distinction” of having enacted the fewest pieces of legislation since Roosevelt took office in 1933. He draws three telling points from Lessig (2011) which enable one to understand why climate action was thwarted in the political arena. Firstly, members of Congress, chronically short of funds spend between 30 percent and 70 percent of their time seeking out opportunities, leaving them wide open to influence from wealthy benefactors. Secondly, and related to the above, public trust in Congress has fallen and over three quarters of the public feel that it works in the interest of big business; and thirdly, and most insidiously, because of their need for funding politicians cultivate relations with lobbyists and attend more to their interests than to those of their citizens⁸³⁴. In sum, politics is shaped by financial realities and institutions are captured because the wealthy set the agenda.

Moreover, McAdam argues that because the US system which grants anonymity to donations to “philanthropic” entities, it is exceedingly difficult to track the funding of anti-climate groups and indeed that this system was designed to be that way. He mentions that in 2014 this was estimated at \$900 million, much of which came from fossil fuel interests (Brulle et al., 2021)⁸³⁵. Money is channelled into institutions, funding lobbying and through contributions campaign funds and to public relations agencies and think tanks that sow doubt in the mind of the public to subvert grassroots action.

McAdam (ibid.) differentiates between formal bureaucratic organizations and social movements whose aim is to disrupt established political routines. He points to the arguments made by resource mobilization theorists that a social movement requires the resources and sustained organization necessary to achieve an outcome (think of the case of MPL discussed in the last chapter where these were lacking). By comparison informal groups, Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) and NGOs form part of the formal structure of society and so are loath to play a disruptive role. Added to this he describes how in the USA, the climate movement is dominated by the most moderate of reform organizations. However, even these nonthreatening groups struggle to gain access to either media or congressional fora, whereas lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry enjoy substantial entrée to both.

In contrast to the piecemeal organization of groups whose aim is to drive awareness of the urgency of taking action to confront the climate emergency, the Climate Change Counter-Movement (CCCM) is a highly organized well connected and well-funded network of libertarian institutions. Multi-purpose right-wing “think tanks” the Cato Institute and the Heritage foundation are among the top funders of the CCCM, and ranked below them are institutions such as the euphemistically named Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow (CFACT) and the Institute for Energy Research whose focus is

⁸³⁴ He mentions Baumgartner et al., (2009, 257-258) In arguing that a disconnect exists between the remit of lobbyists funded by the wealthy and the concerns of the citizenry.

⁸³⁵ According to these sources most funding for the Climate Change Counter Movement (CCCM). came from “Donors’ Trust” which conceals its funding. Donors Trust and Scaife, Bradley and Koch family foundations. are “Donor Advised Funds” which channel and anonymise donations to CCCM although the grants they make and received can be tracked.

entirely on this issue.⁸³⁶ By comparison to those who advocate urgent action to combat global heating, for whom funding is haphazard and short-term, the stable funding and the strong network of right-wing institutions has enabled them to build and construct a highly misleading but none-the-less consistent message.⁸³⁷

In relation to the framing of the issue of global heating, Bruhlle et al, (2021) discuss how the CCCM have engaged in a, “deliberate and organized effort to misdirect and distort public discussion of climate change”, which drives widespread misunderstanding of climate science and contributes to legislative gridlock.⁸³⁸ Discussed further below, one of their chief weapons is to sow doubt in the mind of the average citizen. Discussing the rarity of a grassroots movements for action to address the danger posed to animal life on earth by global heating, McAdam argues that lack of engagement has more to do with subjective impediments to mobilization than with objective opportunities, or the presence or absence of mobilizing structures. He draws on an argument that would be familiar to Robert Dahl, pointing out that, “we humans are creatures of habit, deeply invested in the taken-for-granted routines, behavioural norms, and established worldviews that structure our lives”.⁸³⁹ Climate is an amorphous issue and although the intrusions into life by global heating are accumulating rapidly, it is still relatively easy for many to deflect these, perhaps through buying into the rhetoric that somehow technology driven by AI or by nuclear fusion will ride to the rescue and magically sort it out. To confront the realities presented by the climate crisis requires a wholesale re-evaluation of lifestyle, in relation to which MacAdam argues that to engage in collective action necessitates that we must free ourselves from the carapace of everyday concerns to “depart from those routines, violate those norms and begin to act in accordance with new conceptions of ourselves and the world”. For many, it seems that this was a step too far to consider then, years before Trump-47 began a ferocious and misguided attack on climate science as “woke”.

The Lead Industry: A Paradigm Case

In 1924 the death was announced of Joseph Leslie, a chemical operator in New Jersey. The reality, known only to a select group, was that he had been confined to a psychiatric unit until his actual death in 1964. It was only in 2005 that his wider family were shocked to learn that Leslie was amongst a number of Standard Oil employees who had succumbed to severe lead poisoning.⁸⁴⁰ While authors often point to the tobacco industry as a classic example of non-decision making, the actions of the lead industry predate this. At first glance it seems ridiculous to argue that lead is not severely damaging to human health, for surely every schoolchild knows the devastating effect that lead poisoning had on the ancient Romans?⁸⁴¹ A little known fact is that the lead content of

⁸³⁶ Brulle et al., (2021, 17).

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁸³⁹ McAdam, (2017, 199).

⁸⁴⁰ Kovarik, (2005).

⁸⁴¹ The effects of lead poisoning were known from at least the seventh century AD.

ancient skeletons has been found to be less than half that of modern Europeans.⁸⁴² However, as Rosner and Markowitz (2007) explain, from the early twentieth century, the lead industry conducted an ingenious campaign to undermine arguments against its use, based on deceit, denial and delay.

In the USA, where lead was used as an anti-knock ingredient in petrol and as an additive in paint, the industry deployed three main methods to undermine the case against its use. Thomas Midgely of Standard Oil announced in 1924 that tetraethyl lead would be added to petrol to enhance its performance. This was in spite of vociferous opposition from Dr. Alice Hamilton, an expert in lead, who knew of its especially harmful effect on children. Shortly after production began the New Jersey factory where the additive was produced became known as the “loony-bin building” and the “house of butterflies because of the hallucinations experienced by employees. In 1925 this led the US Surgeon General to issue a temporary ban on the use of lead additive. General Motors volunteered to fund research by a government agency, adding that it required prior approval over the findings.

With DuPont and Standard Oil, General Motors established the Kettering Labs, a research unit at the University of Cincinnati, which for many decades was largely supported by industry funds. In that same decade, the lead industry sponsored the research of Joseph Aub at Harvard who worked on the neurophysiology of lead. Pressure was placed on researchers, directly influencing the scientific integrity of clinical observations such that anyone who described lead as a hazard knew that they could be sidelined and even subjected to intimidation. As a consequence, findings were benign for the industry.

An investigatory committee established by the government was dominated by industry members, with just one independent expert on the panel. Unsurprisingly, tetraethyl additive was given a clean bill of health and lead was exempted from normal measures of public health and from the regulatory apparatus that had largely controlled phosphorus poisoning, poor quality food and meats and other potential public health hazards.

Public health scientists insisted that alternatives to lead existed, but industry in general and General Motors in particular, vehemently insisted that tetraethyl lead was the only additive worthy of consideration. A difficulty for independent researchers is that no primary material was available until 1991 when General Motors made available its archive from 1919 to the late 1920s. A review of the archives suggested that despite concerns about lead poisoning General Motors and other corporations defended and maintained this deadly practice because of the profits yielded.⁸⁴³

Thanks to the release of archival material much more is known about how, in the early twentieth century, the industry sought to undermine a growing body of evidence of the toxicity of lead. The Lead Industries Association was formed in 1928 to counteract opposition to the inclusion of lead in paint and as an additive to petroleum. The industry actively promoted lead as child-friendly in advertising and in comic books. Lead was

⁸⁴² Drasch, 1982).

⁸⁴³ Kovarick, B. (1994). Charles F. Kettering and the discovery of tetraethyl lead. Presented to the Society of Automotive Engineers, Fuels & Lubricants Division conference, Baltimore. See section on Early warnings on lead poisoning.

portrayed as indispensable for modern life and safe for children to use and even touch. Indeed one advertisement depicted a smiling infant reaching for a can of evaporated condensed milk with the accompanying text stating that the milk is kept “pure” through the addition of a drop of lead solder!

The perverse genius of the industry strategy to counter negative publicity about lead poisoning arising from children sucking toys, cradles and woodwork painted with white lead was based on metonymy, focusing on children, but displacing the message from a negative to a positive register. This was channelled through the persona of the *Dutch Paint Boy*, to reassure retailers, and parents. In one advertisement the Paint Boy is depicted holding a bucket of lead paint with the strapline, “Painting the House that Jack Built”. The accompanying text admonishes the retailer “not to overlook children”, and to hand out free “paint books” containing comics to children who visit the retailer with their parent.

White lead paint was promoted as safe and even healthy for children to use throughout the 1930s, such that by 1940 the Lead Industry’s Association praised the campaign’s success in countering concerns about the effects of lead on health. In 1943 the reality that children were being poisoned by paint containing lead became national news.⁸⁴⁴ In 1954 the American Medical Association suggested that lead paint should carry the following: “WARNING This paint contains an amount of lead which may be POISONOUS and should not be used to paint children’s toys or furniture or interior surfaces in dwelling units which might be chewed by children”.⁸⁴⁵ This was resisted by the industry which later adopted a warning that omitted the word “poison”. In 1971, US federal legislation banned the use of lead-based paint in federal buildings.⁸⁴⁶

Researchers advocating the ‘lead-crime hypothesis’ cite evidence that the pernicious effects of lead are even more far-reaching, as humans are especially susceptible to react negatively to the amount of lead in the environment. They cite evidence that lead has had deleterious effects on IQ, and is linked to anti-social behaviour,⁸⁴⁷ violent crime and homicide.⁸⁴⁸ The US lead industry contended that it only became aware of the purported dangers of its products in the 1940s. However, this claim has since been belied by the release of internal documents which reveal that it had been aware of the danger for decades. Rather than facing up to the problem the industry chose to address it by engaging in a policy of deceit, denial and delay stretching over decades.

⁸⁴⁴ Markowitz, G. & D. Rosner (2000: 42).

⁸⁴⁵ Markowitz, G. & D. Rosner (2000: 44).

⁸⁴⁶ PUBLIC LAW 91-695-JAN. 13, (1971). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-84/pdf/STATUTE-84-Pg2078.pdf>

⁸⁴⁷ Reyes, (2007).

⁸⁴⁸ See Nevin, (2000) and Higney, et al., Hanley, (2020) for a meta-analysis which claims that the reduction in lead pollution may be responsible for the reduction of between 7 percent and 28 percent of homicide in the USA. In *Lucifer Curves*, Rick Nevin (2007) argues that preschool lead poisoning fuelled crime waves over the centuries. 1941-1975 gasoline lead use explained 90 percent of the 1964-1998 variation in the USA violent crime rate, and paint lead trends from 1879-1938 explained a 10-fold rise and subsequent fall in the USA murder rate from 1900-1959.

As you read the above you may well be thinking that all of this happened a long time ago in the distant past and is no longer relevant today. The reality is that lead continues to be used in a number of products such that overall usage increased by 16 percent in the USA from 2001 to 2016. Some of the messages used to promote lead today are not so different from those employed one hundred years ago; lead is “modern” and “advanced”; lead is “durable” and “clean”; lead is “essential,” “green,” “sustainable,” “low carbon” and “responsible”; and, “lead is safe because it is not banned and is even required under government specifications”.⁸⁴⁹

Asbestos

The asbestos industry might equally serve as a paradigm case. Although pulmonary asbestosis was first recognised early in the twentieth century, the industry successfully delayed publication of reports about its toxicity. Asbestos was in wide use as an insulation material and here I should declare a personal interest in that for a brief time I worked as a labourer manually hauling sheets of white asbestos up six flights of stairs in London Bridge House. Bizarrely, the union I was a member of had made a deal that asl was to be paid a daily sum equivalent to the purchase of a pint of milk as some form of compensation – I still haven’t found the research that suggests milk as a curative! Less well known is that asbestos is also found in talcum powder. Recent court cases involving Johnson & Johnson and Cape Industry Holdings reveal that for years, executives in each company systematically withheld research that mesothelioma can be caused by brief exposure to asbestos.⁸⁵⁰

In 2017 a court case by a shopfitting company resulted in the release of internal company documents which revealed that as far back as 1958, Cape advised its partners not to put warning labels on asbestos-based insulation boards because of the damage this might do to profits. Over the years the company repeatedly assured buyers that its products were safe. Likewise, Johnson & Johnson engaged in a years-long policy of deception.⁸⁵¹

Volkswagen, Wirecard and the Failure of Regulation

It was only because Dan McCrum was a journalist operating with the substantial institutional backing of the *Financial Times*, that the massive criminality involving the theft of billions of Euros by Wirecard executives was exposed.⁸⁵² To discover that McCrum and the FT were subsequently themselves sued by Wirecard was not surprising, as that seems to be a standard tactic engaged in by corporations trying to silence their critic. Astonishingly, the German government regulator initiated a criminal investigation, not of Wirecard but of McCrum, instigating a long and bitter battle that could not have succeeded without the considerable resources of the FT. John Lanchester argues that

⁸⁴⁹ This last sentence is more or less verbatim from Gottesfeld, (2022) as is the statistic about 16 percent.

⁸⁵⁰ White, T. (2022). Bad Dust. *London Review of Books*, 21st July: 43.

⁸⁵¹ See for example, Mauney, M. (W. Pacheco ed.), 2017, Johnson and Johnson facing asbestos talcum powder lawsuits. asbestos.com

⁸⁵² McCrumm, D. (2022). *Money men: A hot startup, a billion dollar fraud, a fight for the truth*. Bantam.

the Wirecard and the Volkswagen emission scandal that erupted at around the same time are not examples of individual corporate misbehaviour but of a mobilisation of bias involving deeply embedded norms prevailing in the cultural and institutional context of Germany.

Lanchester argues that capitalism has a local flavour, whose German form has long been regarded as “grown-up” by comparison to the rife speculation and financialization of the US and UK. He argues that this led to a sense of complacency. In 2008, at the time of the Volkswagen and Wirecard scandals, Germany was the most powerful country in Europe, Volkswagen was the most valuable company in the world, and car manufacturing was the most powerful lobby in Germany. Volkswagen’s rival Toyota, when confronted with increasing concern over the use of fossil fuels, had made the move to hybrid vehicles. Volkswagen instead decided to focus on diesel fuel and lobbied German and EU regulators hard to persuade them of diesel’s advantages, the main one being that diesel is more energy-efficient than petrol and as a result, produces lower CO₂ emissions. Lanchester describes what happened next; “so, as if by magic, Europe began a switch to diesel engines in cars, with government incentives persuading many consumers to move across... By 2002, 40 percent of car purchases in Europe were diesels.”⁸⁵³

Lanchester points out that the physics were never quite as simple as made out by advocates of so-called “clean” diesel. Diesel has lower CO₂ emissions but the engine must be run hot, which releases nitrogen oxide that is a more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂. Additionally, the relation between inhalation of diesel particulates to conditions such as lung cancer has been widely known since 1990.⁸⁵⁴ Despite this, Volkswagen and other manufacturers of diesel engines joined fossil fuel companies to sponsor repeated critiques and reanalyses of studies that found diesel engine emission particulates increase lung cancer risk. At the same time Volkswagen secretly installed “defeat devices” to fool auto emissions testing systems into underestimating the pollution emitted by its cars’ diesel engines (Michaels, 2020). Brazenly, the car presented by Volkswagen presented for testing by US scientists in Albuquerque in 2014 was rigged to reduce emissions. Moreover, the organization that commissioned the Albuquerque study, the European Research Group on Environment and Health in the Transport Sector, received all of its funding from Volkswagen, Daimler and BMW. This shut down in 2021 amid controversy over its work. It sponsored research that challenged a 2012 decision by the World Health Organization to classify diesel exhaust as a carcinogen. It financed studies that cast doubt on whether banning older diesel vehicles from cities reduced pollution.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵³ Lanchester, John (2022). *Fraudpocalypse*. London Review of Books, 4th August: 3. I also bought a diesel car at the time!

⁸⁵⁴ See Mauderly, (2001) and California Air Resources Board, Summary, *Diesel Particulate Matter Health Impacts*, for a timeline. <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/summary-diesel-particulate-matter-health-impacts>

⁸⁵⁵ Ewing, Jack (2018). 10 monkeys and a Beetle: Inside VW’s campaign for “clean diesel”. *The New York Times*, Jan. 25th. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/world/europe/volkswagen-diesel-emissions-monkeys.html>

While full explication of events at Volkswagen and Wirecard would require volumes to explain the collusive actions of executives, regulators and other corporate stakeholders, the above description provides something of a snapshot of the key events. These are examples of non-decisionmaking in that each involved an active process of seeking to preserve the status quo so as to preserve a particular mobilization of bias on their behalf. In the case of Volkswagen, millions were duped for years into purchasing cars that they thought were “clean”. The period between Wirecard’s rise and fall from 2001 to 2020 was much shorter, although for much of that time it sought to obstruct and delay investigation. Non-decisionmaking in the case of Volkswagen involved a company that went all out to fool regulators and the public, as Lanchester puts it, “We are the car people, we want to make diesel engines; our diesel engines will not pass tests; therefore the tests are wrong and must be circumvented.”⁸⁵⁶ What joins the Volkswagen and Wirecard cases is that critical voices came from outside German capitalism, and that in both cases the German regulator failed, in the case of Wirecard going so far as to attack the public-spirited critic.

Summarising The Playbook⁸⁵⁷

When faced with an existential threat, a corporation, or corporate members of an industry, will tend to seek to defend their perceived interests by deploying mechanisms from a widely used “playbook” that has been developed and refined over decades, perhaps from even before the lead industry devised its version. Bacharach and Baratz refer to mechanisms such as framing and the establishment of fruitless commissions of inquiry to ‘discover the facts’, when these are already well known.⁸⁵⁸ Best known is the tobacco Industry playbook which operated over decades and is very well documented.⁸⁵⁹ Similar playbooks have been used by businesses involved in the development and marketing of harmful products such as sugar, asbestos, chemicals and, as described above, fossil fuels. A key approach developed by the tobacco industry was for competitors to take joint covert action by forming a committee which devised a dual strategy to tell the public one thing and by saying and doing the opposite behind closed doors. Reframing the narrative and focussing all resources on relaying this to all stakeholders to neutralise opposition was a central element in this enterprise.

Reframe the Narrative: Sow Doubt

Learn the facts...then deny then in public

Insiders know very well the reality of the harms caused by consumption of their products to consumers, the public at large and to the wider environment, knowledge which they

⁸⁵⁶ Lanchester, (2022: 7).

⁸⁵⁷ “Playbook” is now common currency to describe such actions. This section was written long before publication of *The Playbook* by Janet Jacquet (2020). See also, Union of Concerned Scientists, (2018). *The Disinformation Playbook How Business Interests Deceive, Misinform, and Buy Influence at the Expense of Public Health and Safety*, 18th May. <https://www.ucs.org/resources/disinformation-playbook>

⁸⁵⁸ Bachrach & Baratz, (1975).

⁸⁵⁹ See the Tobacco Masters Settlement Agreement: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobacco_Master_Settlement_Agreement

ruthlessly suppress in the interest of short-term product. They seek to sow doubt in the minds of policy makers and the public by controlling academic research through intimidating and seeking to co-opt independent researchers. Public relations agencies are employed to edit research that casts suggests that a product is harmful and to embellish contrarian findings as “sound science”.⁸⁶⁰ For instance, in the above case lead was promoted as beneficial.

Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola sought to shift the focus of the obesity research agenda by funding research that focused on physical activity, thereby downplaying the role of sugar-sweetened beverages in developing obesity. The corporation also tried to conceal its role in funding the research.⁸⁶¹ The Global Energy Balance Network was established as a nonprofit concerned with preventing diseases associated with inactivity, poor nutrition and obesity. Anahad O'Connor investigating for *The New York Times* reported that Coca-Cola Corporation had given this group \$1.5 million to get started and had supported the work of two of the group's founders to the tune of almost \$4 million. Messaging on the site frames the core issue relating to obesity as lack of physical activity as opposed to diet. Investigating further O'Connor found that Coca-Cola had actually registered and launched this supposedly independent website, and were listed as its administrator.⁸⁶²

British Petroleum and ExxonMobil

Although the US government had helped British Petroleum (BP) retain its assets in Iran in 1953, through the CIA overthrow of President Mossadegh, fossil fuel interests do not seem to have subsequently been as tightly aligned as those of the tobacco industry.⁸⁶³ The initial response to scientific concern about global heating was similar on both sides of the Atlantic, so that for decades, corporate giants such as ExxonMobil and BP questioned, downplayed, or denied this. This was in spite of evidence that internally, executives were fully aware of the dire projections of their own scientists, which accorded with those of independent experts.⁸⁶⁴

It seemed that a turning point might have been reached in 1997, when in a speech to Stanford University, John Browne, CEO of British Petroleum (BP) publicly broke ranks to acknowledge the serious threat caused by increasing emissions of fossil fuels and to

⁸⁶⁰ Michaels, (2008, 2020).

⁸⁶¹ O'Connor, A. (2015). Coca Cola funds effort to alter obesity battle.: emphasis on exercise. *The New York Times*, Aug. 10th. <https://wallacehouse.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/OConnor.pdf>

⁸⁶² NPR (2015). Coca-Cola Funds Scientists Who Downplay Diet's Role In Obesity. <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/10/431343137/coca-cola-funds-scientists-who-downplay-diets-role-in-obesity?t=1660050973380>

⁸⁶³ Chevron and ExxonMobil were much less keen on renewables than their European counterparts (Pickl, 2019).

⁸⁶⁴ Supran & Oreskes, (2023). Additionally, Supran and Oreskes (2021), found that, compared with Mobil advertorials, which promoted debate about climate science, and ExxonMobil Corp advertorials, which did the same or ignored it, Exxon's internal conversations focused on it.

announce the corporation's commitment to renewable energy.⁸⁶⁵ Browne recalled that he was subsequently visited by senior oil executives who asked him if he 'had lost the plot'.⁸⁶⁶ BP then launched its *Beyond Petroleum* initiative, appointing Ogilvy and Mather to produce a new "green" corporate identity, with a reputed overall budget of £200 million.⁸⁶⁷ Despite this high profile campaign, spending on oil and gas projects by BP continued to dwarf that on renewables, which struggled to make a return, leading to accusations of "greenwashing". Additionally, incidents in Texas, Prudhoe Bay, Alaska and especially the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, badly damaged BP's image and financial security. In 2025, as Donald Trump proclaimed, "Drill Baby Drill", BP announced that it was sidelining renewables to focus once more on its 'core' oil and gas businesses.⁸⁶⁸

In the USA, data analytics has provided a glimpse into the different stance adopted by ExxonMobil. In one study researchers compared internal and scientific peer reviewed publications from ExxonMobil with its public advertorials published between 1977 and 2014. The researchers found that 83 percent of peer-reviewed papers and 80 percent of internal documents were consistent with the opinions of external scientists, acknowledging the threat posed by global heating and that this is caused by human action through burning fossil fuels. In marked contrast, just 12 percent of advertorials admitted this with 81 percent expressing doubt. The researchers concluded that while the academic publications of ExxonMobil had contributed advanced understanding of global warming, the corporation had effectively misled the public by instilling doubt. In a follow-up study the authors provided evidence that Exxon also funded a number of organizations that sought to cast doubt on the reality of climate change and the contribution of human activity to global warming. Supran and Oreskes (2021) went into some detail to explain how ExxonMobil advertorials selectively framed global heating by emphasizing some terms and topics and by avoiding others. The authors found that three rhetorical frames were extensively used,

- *From "Uncertainty to Risk"*: Initially the aim was as to create an image of uncertainty around the scientific basis of claims for global heating so as to cast doubt on the scientific consensus in the public mind. As evidence for global heating accumulated with a growing scientific consensus, the tone in advertorials moderated to describe global heating as a "potential risk". This ploy is similar to that the tobacco industry when arguing that life is short and that smoking, which is pleasurable and can be enjoyed now, is just one risk amongst many.

⁸⁶⁵ Murray, S. (2022). Former BP Head Reflects on His Call for Climate Action 25 Years Ago. *Stanford Business*, 5th July.

⁸⁶⁶ Browne, John (2010). *Beyond business: an inspirational memoir from a visionary leader*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, Orion Publishing.

⁸⁶⁷ Landman, A. (2010). BP's Beyond Petroleum campaign losing its sheen. *The centre for media and democracy's PR Watch*.

⁸⁶⁸ Jack, S. & F. Masud, (2025). BP shuns renewables in return to oil and gas. *BBC News*, 26th Feb.

- *Individualisation*: While Browne's speech at Stanford may have suggested that British Petroleum was turning a corner, by devising the darkly ingenious notion of the carbon footprint, Ogilvy and Mather helped to reframe the problem of global heating as a matter of personal, not corporate responsibility. The second frame used by ExxonMobil operated in a similar way, to individualise responsibility and so deflect from industry responsibility through arguments for voluntary action as opposed to "costly" regulation. Advertorials constantly blamed energy demand, often framed in terms of "need" which was portrayed as inexorable, deflecting discussion away from specifics pertaining to the consumption of oil, coal and gas. This deflection of blame onto the individual by posing a social problem as a matter of individual choice and responsibility, has also been employed as a framing device to deflect responsibility amongst others, the lead, alcohol, food and tobacco industries.
- *Composite discourse*: The third discourse is a composite of several elements:
 - *Technology will save us*: This was promoted through advertorials such as 'we have industry leading investments in technology', offering "solutions" such as carbon capture.
 - *Fossil Fuel Solutionism*: This presented the fossil fuel industry as essential and indeed indispensable into the long run prosperity of all.
 - *Technology Shell Game*: This refers to a conjuror's trick where a coin is hidden underneath one of three shells. In this context it refers to attacks on renewables as 'variable' and 'requiring lots of land'. Additionally it sought to alleviate concern by promoting "natural" gas as "clean".

When denial no longer works move to delay

Sew Doubt

Described above as the progression by ExxonMobil changed the framing of global heating by moving from silence or outright denial, to the attempt to create uncertainty about the evidence and to question the scientific consensus, then as a 'potential risk'. Sewing doubt was also a tactic used by the tobacco industry when in 1977, seven of the world's major tobacco companies conspired to promote "controversy" over smoking and disease, in an exercise called Operation Berkshire. This conspiracy resulted in the International Committee on Smoking Issues (subsequently the International Tobacco Information Centre), which operated through an internationally coordinated network of national manufacturers' associations to retard measures for tobacco control. (Francey, & Chapman, 2000).

The lead industry had earlier supported Harvard professor Joseph Aub to perform research that ignored the effects of lead on children (Markowitz and Rosner, 2002). Chemical companies also routinely hire scientific consulting firms such as Exponent, ChemRisk, Ramboll, and Gradient to produce studies that dispute the hazards of products for lawmaking and litigation (Michaels 2020). The oil industry hired economists

whom they referred to misleadingly as independent researchers to develop biased climate models that inflate the predicted costs of addressing global heating and omit discussion of the benefits for doing so. This played an important role in forestalling action on climate change over decades (Franta, 2022).

As overwhelmingly irrefutable evidence grows (For instance, that lead *is* poisonous, that cigarettes actually *do* cause cancer, or that fossil fuels *do* contribute to global heating), denial is no longer a viable option and instead the industry devises discourses of delay. Thus by the early 1980s in response to this the tobacco industry in the US and UK began to market “low tar” cigarettes to older consumers in a bid to stop them quitting. As mentioned above, the fossil-fuel industry has engaged in greenwashing, for instance by purchasing a small “sustainable” business and by widely promoting this, and by encouraging the idea that somehow a so-far unproven technology such as nuclear fusion will provide a solution.

Suppress critics

There are good reasons not to take action when one discovers corporate malfeasance. The fate of whistleblowers who are often ostracised by their colleagues is well-known and those indomitable individuals who eventually succeed can be subjected to immense personal pressure. Such pressure was evident in the ‘McLibel’ case as three members of London Greenpeace backed down before the trial and it subsequently transpired that there was collusion between MacDonald’s and the police and private detectives.

The USA is most often chosen as the site for legal battles because of the ability to bring criminal suits against corporate executives. Rob Bilott who worked as a corporate lawyer accidentally became involved in a class action against Dupont, when visiting his mother when her neighbour a local farmer called Wilbur Tennant phoned to complain that his cows were being poisoned.⁸⁶⁹ On requesting legal discovery of relevant papers from Dupont, Bilott was swamped with a veritable torrent of documentation. He nonetheless persevered and began to discover mentions of a substance involved in the production of Teflon called PFOA, (perfluorooctanoic acid) which he came to learn is a highly damaging “forever chemical”.

One of the most bizarre and complex cases was that involving Steven Donziger who had recently graduated in law from Harvard when he took up the cause of indigenous people, whose land had been polluted by Texaco (Later Chevron), filing a 30,000 person class-action lawsuit for polluting the Amazon.⁸⁷⁰ On leaving the Oriente region of Ecuador in 1992, Texaco had left behind hundreds of open pits containing toxic sludge, some of them the size of swimming pools, with the result that the population has suffered from

⁸⁶⁹ See Billott, (2019). Also Rich, N. (2016). The lawyer who became Dupont’s worst nightmare. *The New York Times*, Jan. 6th. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/magazine/the-lawyer-who-became-duponts-worst-nightmare.html>

⁸⁷⁰ A timeline and more detailed explanation of this case may be found at the Business and Human Rights Resource Center, USA (2020), *Environmental lawyer who fought Chevron for oil pollution in Ecuador disbarred; legal experts form committee to monitor criminal contempt trial* (<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/usa-environmental-lawyer-who-fought-chevron-for-oil-pollution-in-ecuador-disbarred-legal-experts-allege-judicial-misconduct/>)

direct exposure to oil and from eating contaminated animals and fish.⁸⁷¹ The saga that unfolded has featured in hundreds of articles and commentaries in addition to a documentary and a book.⁸⁷²

The suit taken by Donziger against Texaco, was initially brought in New York, to seek compensation for damage to the environment and to human health. However, Texaco asked the US court for permission to have the case moved to Ecuador as according to some, it was favoured by the ruling military elite. The US court ruled that Ecuador had jurisdiction and dismissed the case on condition that Chevron accepted the decision of the Ecuadorian court. In 1994, Texaco paid the state-owned Petroecuador \$40 million to remediate the damage caused to the land in Oriente. Donziger and his team then decided not to pursue Petroecuador in the case but to focus their fire on Texaco.

It was not until 2003, ten years after the initial presentation to the New York court that the case came before an Ecuadorian court. In the meantime, Texaco had merged with Chevron, so the suit by Donziger was now against Chevron-Texaco Corporation. The move in 1994 by Texaco to move jurisdiction from the USA to Ecuador seemed to backfire when the military government of Ecuador was displaced following the election of a left-wing president in 2007, the implication being that the corporation could no longer rely on the levers of the state to side with its case. In 2011, the Ecuadorian court awarded \$18 billion to the plaintiffs represented by Donziger. Chevron-Texaco appealed its conviction in 2012, submitted 50,000 pages of evidence in support, following which the appeal court reduced the sum awarded to \$8.65 billion.⁸⁷³ Chevron refused to pay and subsequently the \$8.65 billion was set aside by an international tribunal.⁸⁷⁴

Having first moved from the USA to have the initial case heard in Ecuador, Chevron's then decided to move its action once more to the USA, filing a RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) suit against Donziger in New York. Chevron's case which relied partially on outtakes from *Crude*, a film act made by supporters of Donziger, alleged that the report, which had been submitted to the Ecuadorian court as written by an independent expert, had actually been ghostwritten by others.⁸⁷⁵ Ghostwriting is similar to plagiarism as it involves concealing authorship, but is also its opposite, in that authors

⁸⁷¹ Kirsch, (2022, 338).

⁸⁷² The documentary was entitled *Crude* (Berlinger et al. 2009). See also, Goldhaber, M.D. (2014) *Crude awakening*, Rosetta Books. While the former were sympathetic to the cause of Donziger, Paul Barrett was rather unsparing in his criticism, often referring to his personal idiosyncracies. See Barrett, P. (2014), *Law of the Jungle: the \$19 billion Legal Battle Over Oil in the Rain Forest and the Lawyer Who'd Stop at Nothing to Win.*: Crown Publishers. Donziger sent a "Notice of Defamation" letter to Barrett and the publishers, alleging that the book contained "improperly sourced and possibly plagiarized material, is replete with factual inaccuracies, describes events that did not occur, and in other ways promoted information known by Barrett to be false and defamatory."- Source, Harrison – see next footnote.

⁸⁷³ Harrison, M. (2014) Book review, law of the jungle. *Earth Rights*, 6th October.

⁸⁷⁴ International Tribunal rules in favour of Chevron in Ecuador case. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chevron-ecuador/international-tribunal-rules-in-favor-of-chevron-in-ecuador-case-idUSKCN1LN1WS>

⁸⁷⁵ These showed members of Donziger's team discussing their contribution to the supposedly independent technical report (Kirsch, 2022, 344-345).

“sever all relationships to their written work, forfeiting ownership and control, while on the other hand (Kirsch, 2022, 336). In 2014 Judge Kaplan dismissed the ruling of the Ecuadorian court on the ground that it had been obtained through bribery, and racketeering and ordered Donziger to pay \$800,000 in costs and to surrender all of his electronic equipment for analysis. He refused to pay or to comply with the demands of the court and was then fined a further \$666,476.34 and a \$2,000 fine set to double for each day it was not received. Shortly afterwards, Judge Kaplan ruled that Donziger pay Chevron \$3.4 million in legal costs, the highest possible sentence.

When Donziger cited attorney-client privilege in refusing to pay or to hand over his cellphone and computer, judge Kaplan then charged him with criminal contempt. Donziger was debarred from practicing law in 2019, and from August of that year was confined to home custody for six hundred days. In 2020 he served legal papers to review his disbarment. In November, the criminal trial against Donziger was postponed until January 2021. So unusual was it that this action was brought by a private not a public prosecutor, that when it was eventually heard, seven legal experts formed a committee to monitor the criminal action involving Chevron and Donziger as it unfolded in New York..

Summarising the above, Donziger spent many years of his life on this case and was eventually himself accused of extortion and sued by Chevron for \$60 million (Chevron has funds of \$228 billion), his bank accounts were frozen, a lien was made on his apartment and he spent over 600 days under house arrest.⁸⁷⁶ Compared to Donziger’s small team Chevron’s legal representation consisted of hundreds of lawyers from dozens of firms. In an interview in 2022, Donziger was reported to have said, “I’d like to think the United States is not one of those countries that locks up its human rights lawyers or its environmental justice lawyers. My case proves that at least for now that’s not true anymore.”⁸⁷⁷ While Donziger is no longer in prison, lawyers have expressed disquiet concerning the highly unusual decision made by Justice Kaplan to allow the case to be prosecuted by private individuals rather than by the state. At the time of writing the US Supreme Court had still not made a decision as to whether or not the prosecution of Donziger had been constitutional.⁸⁷⁸

The intricacy, complexity, cost and sheer duration of cases such as the above are daunting, as most of all is the dogged persistence required if one is to confront the staggering collective force and facelessness of corporate power that has literally life-consuming effects for those individuals and groups who dare to contest it. For corporations that is precisely the point! The people whom Donziger and other nameless individuals represented who live in the Oriente rainforest and whose livelihoods were blighted by decades of widespread oil contamination are still prevented by the RICO suit

⁸⁷⁶ Bronkovich, Erin (2022) This lawyer should be world-famous for his battle with Chevron – but he’s in jail. *The Guardian*, 8th Feb. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/08/chevron-amazon-ecuador-steven-donziger-erin-brockovich>

⁸⁷⁷ Woods, C (2025), Chevron’s pursuit of US lawyer Steven Donziger, *LSJ Online*. 5th Feb.

⁸⁷⁸ O’Brien, (2024).

from collecting the billions of dollars awarded to them and against Chevron in the Ecuadorian courts (Kirsch, 2022).

Co-opt Politicians

Politicians are prime targets for co-option by business interests because they control massive flows of money through their power to, tax, regulate, grant subsidies and issue fines and mandates. From the perspective of an industry whose activities result in public harm, the primary aim is to prevent or to stall regulation, in the achievement of which several industries have been extraordinarily successful. The key decision relating to whether or not to ban the addition of tetraethyl lead to petrol was made in 1926, when a Congressional Committee ruled in favour of the additive. This outcome did not surprise insiders who knew that the membership of the Committee was dominated by industry, who accepted the (false) argument that there was no alternative. From then until 1965, the presumption was that airborne lead is harmless. During all that time, the Kettering Laboratory of Cincinnati, established by General Motors, was the main source of data on the effects of lead (Needleman, 2000). Concerns were raised by independent scientists from 1959 and evidence then slowly accrued of the damage caused by lead. It was not until 1970 that politicians legislated to pass the Clean Air Act, which mandated a 90 percent reduction in emissions of hydrocarbons. However, by 1985, almost sixty years after the decision to allow its use, tetraethyl lead was still used in 40 percent of all petrol sold (Kovarick, 2005).

As Taylor (1984) describes it, politicians in the USA and UK had good reasons to hesitate to regulate the sale of tobacco. One thing they shared in common that essentially made them personally part of the “Smoke Ring” was that many were themselves smokers. Taylor argues that given the billions the industry raised in tax revenues, government needed tobacco almost as much as tobacco interests needed government. He describes this dependence on tobacco money as an addiction leading to complicity and a failure to act despite the accumulation of overwhelming evidence of the lethal damage done by tobacco to human health.

While a degree of complicity between the legislature and tobacco interests is perhaps understandable, why some politicians continue to deny that human activities are causing climate change is a more complex multifaceted issue. According to one source, close to one-third of the US Senate and one-fifth of members of Congress continue to refuse to acknowledge this. Given the weight of evidence, it is scarcely credible that they believe in what they say in public. As noted by McAdam (2017), most obviously, politicians elected in districts where large numbers of voters are employed in the fossil fuel industry and those who receive campaign funds from the industry may be motivated by their sense of realpolitik as opposed to reality.⁸⁷⁹ Another compelling reason is as the result of direct pressure from “grassroots” groups such as the Tea Party and American Prosperity (Bland & Journal, 2015) combined to enflame the MAGA “base” with the notion that climate

⁸⁷⁹ Open Secrets (2022). <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?ind=E01>

change is a hoax.⁸⁸⁰ American Prosperity was launched and is partly funded by Charles and David Koch, owners of Koch Industries whose business is intricately bound up with fossil fuels.

“Crony capitalism “ was first used as a label by George Taber to describe the kleptocratic Marcos regime that held sway in the Philippines, where the elite grew immensely rich on the back of the poor.⁸⁸¹ One study found that fraudulent companies have spent more money on lobbying and that companies that have hired lobbyists have been much less likely to be detected for fraud by regulators.⁸⁸² Crony capitalism is the term used to describe how US politicians have managed to accrue considerable wealth, despite their relatively modest earnings. Peter Schweizer (2011) argues that their access to inside information that can dramatically affect the economy and financial markets, has enabled them to profit hugely from lucrative property and share deals. This now seems tame as crony capitalism has at least temporarily entered a new era under the regime of Trump-47 where blatant bribery and corruption occur in plain sight, as governments curry favour and craven CEOs rush to pay obeisance to the would-be tsar.⁸⁸³

Co-opt Academics

Co-option of academics is essential if one is to control the narrative. It can be difficult to separate co-option from coercion, as the former can shade almost imperceptibly into the other. In a related context lecturers in UK universities have told me how they are now co-opted to disbelieve in their own standards because of the mantra “the student is always right”, so that they must be a bad teacher and will be hauled up before the Dean, if they rashly decide to fail a student.

Co-option involves a level of symbolic violence to the academic researcher by limiting their freedom to choose their topic of interest, the scope of their research programme or how they write up and report their results. Ideally, from the perspective of the corporation, the scope of the research will be narrowed and confined to subjects that are innocuous to, or which produce results that dispute findings that are critical of its interests; euphemisms will be chosen to replace “contentious” statements which will otherwise be omitted, and academics may be “offered” the “guidance” of corporate PR departments to help “communicate their findings” to the outside world. The potential stick is that of the expression of corporate displeasure to the research unit, department,

⁸⁸⁰ Greenpeace. *Americans for Prosperity Foundation*. Accessed August 2022. See also, Center for American Progress (2021). *Climate deniers in the 117th Congress*, March 30th. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/climate-deniers-117th-congress>

⁸⁸¹ Taber, G. (1980). *A case of crony capitalism*. Time, April 21st.

⁸⁸² Yu & Yu, (2011).

⁸⁸³ Luscombe, R. (2025). Trump’s acceptance of Qatar jet gift is ‘definition of corruption’, senator says. *The Guardian*, 18th May. In August 2025, Adams, C. (2025). Billionaire Apple CEO Tim Cook Sucks Up to Trump With Tacky Gold Gift, *Daily Beast*, 7th August. Perhaps an all-time low was struck when Tom Baker of GMI presented Trump solid gold bust costing a reputed \$55 million of his (Baker’s head), with mouth agape, quoting, “we are ready to get down and dirty”. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/4HtLn0ieNbE>

Head of School, or university Principal, perhaps accompanied by a veiled threat over funding.

Tobacco

The co-option of academics by business interests has a long provenance, dating at least from that of Harvard professor Joseph Aub, whose study omitted to consider the effects of lead on children (Markowitz and Rosner 2002). Although the practice is longstanding, Owen and Braeutigam (1978: 7) first mentioned the need for regulated industries to co-opt experts “especially academics” to advocate their cause to forestall state intervention and regulation. While this is of course entirely legitimate, numerous industries threatened by regulation have since co-opted scientists in government and the academy to act in their commercial interest. The tobacco industry, under *Operation Whitecoat*, funded a worldwide network of scientists to act as spokespeople and convince the public that the harms of cigarettes remained unproven (U.S. v. Philip Morris USA, Inc., 2006).

Once it has established an umbrella organisation, the easiest way for an industry to control the narrative is to establish and fund its own research initiative in order to control the research agenda (Bowden, Foster & Walsh, 2007). In 1953 once executives had themselves become convinced of the facts about smoking and cancer the US Tobacco Industry established the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC), with the ostensible aim to investigate that very same link. In December. CEOs meet to devise a joint strategy, culminating in publication of a two-page advertisement in 448 newspapers in January 1954 entitled “A Frank Statement”, which denied any claimed link between smoking and cancer. Over the next forty years the TIRC, renamed the Council for Tobacco Research in 1964, funded over \$300 million of research, almost none of which focused on the link between smoking and cancer.⁸⁸⁴

Those who did find a link between smoking and cancer, did not fare well. One prominent scientist reported to BBC *Panorama* that when his research team discovered a link between smoking and cancer he was advised not to use the word “cancer” to describe his findings; the press conference arranged to publicize his findings was mysteriously cancelled and he was told that his funding was in jeopardy of not being renewed.⁸⁸⁵ In 1958, the American Cancer Society argued that the aim of the TIRC was: “to deny repeatedly” and “mislead” and “to convince the trusting tobacco-consuming public of the industry’s ‘lasting interest in people’s health.’”⁸⁸⁶ Later it was asserted that the chief role of the CTR was to sell cigarettes.⁸⁸⁷ In a 1998 law suit “United States Vs Philip Morris” Judge Gladys Kessler stated that the TIRC/CTR was: ‘a sophisticated public

⁸⁸⁴ Tobacco Tactics (2020). Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC). University of Bath. <https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/tobacco-industry-research-committee/#ttref-note-6>

⁸⁸⁵ Mangold, Tom, (1993). *Pack of Lies*, BBC Panorama, 10th May. IMDB.

⁸⁸⁶ American Cancer Society, CA – Bulletin of Cancer Progress, March-April 1958: 71.

⁸⁸⁷ Warner K.E. (1991) Tobacco industry scientific advisors: Serving society or selling cigarettes? *Am J Public Health*. Vol.81:839 842.

relations vehicle based on the premise of conducting independent scientific research – to deny the harms of smoking and reassure the public.’⁸⁸⁸

Jumping forward to today, at a time when state funding of research has been declining for decades and is actively being withdrawn in the USA, universities must increasingly rely on funding from charities and foundational trusts. The “Foundation for a Smoke Free World” (FSFW) describes itself as a non-profit organisation that operates “free from the control or influence of any third party” to fund research that will reduce world-wide demand for tobacco. One might argue, “So far so good!” However, at time of writing FSFW was solely funded by Philip Morris International, leading one to wonder what silent pressures might be exerted on institutions that took up the offer of funding.⁸⁸⁹

Fossil Fuels

In relation to climate change, as described above, it is now known that ExxonMobil had full knowledge of global warming as long as forty years ago but suppressed the findings and then engaged in a policy of denial and delay. Economic consultants who were presented to the media and public as independent were in fact funded by the fossil fuel industry. These consultants developed models that inflated the predicted costs of dealing with global warming and ignored the benefits of taking immediate action. Franta (2011) argues that these supposedly independent consultants played a key role in undermining major climate initiatives over decades, such as carbon pricing and participation in international climate agreements. The fossil fuel industry actively denigrated scientific findings, misled regulators and engaged in a massive campaign to hide their destruction of habitats and the threat of continued use of fossil fuels to life on earth under a veneer of greenwash (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Moreover frequent assertions made by U.S. policy-makers and the media that climate science on global warming was highly uncertain were entirely false (Oreskes, 2004).

In the early noughties the fossil fuel industry began to turn exploit huge oil and gas reserves stored in shale deposits in the USA and Canada. Anthony Ingraffea was amongst the scientists who developed the commercial process called fracking. To begin with Ingraffea subscribed to the almost universally shared view that shale gas is an alternative to oil and gas as it produces much less carbon dioxide. What he had not factored was that the process of fracking, distribution and consumption of gas also leads to emissions of methane, which has a proportionately much more damaging effect on climate than coal and oil. To put this into perspective if emissions of methane are more than 3 percent of the total from fracking, then “natural” gas production will contribute more to global warming than oil or coal. Ingraffea moved to Cornell University where he co-authored a paper with a colleague warning of the dangers of methane leakage (Howarth et al. 2011). The paper which was leaked before publication and drew furious criticism from some academic colleagues and from industry.⁸⁹⁰ Until recently, a Google

⁸⁸⁸ United States District Court: Civil Action Number 99-2496 (GK) 1998.

⁸⁸⁹ See Enserink, (2018) and also Tobacco Tactics, (2024). *Foundation for a smoke-free world*. University of Bath, August.

⁸⁹⁰ For instance, Catles et al., (2012) argued that the findings were seriously flawed.

search for this paper would have brought up a highly critical response from the Natural Gas Alliance which represents the fracking industry. Strangely, when I tried to access the paper which had two thousand citations just now, I drew a blank response from the Springer Link website. Following publication of the paper Howarth and others were followed, their activities filmed, details of their homes were released to the public and their mail was stolen.⁸⁹¹ Howarth and Ingraffea have continued to reiterate their concern in relation to the use of fracking for “natural” gas, that this will not act as a bridge from coal and oil to “clean” energy but will exacerbate global heating by adding methane to the atmosphere.⁸⁹²

Chemicals

Big Oil is not the only industry to use consultants to further its cause. Chemical companies routinely hire scientific consulting firms such as Exponent, ChemRisk, Ramboll, and Gradient to produce studies disputing the hazards of products for lawmaking and litigation (Michaels, 2020). A systematic review of the influence of industry sponsorship of university research found that this narrowed the agenda to support policies with commercial applications and to ignore other pressing public health concerns (Fabbri et al. 2018).

Medicine

The number of authors who have raised concern about the increasing penetration of academic medical research by the pharmaceutical industry had reached epidemic proportions (forgive the pun) long before Covid struck (Healy & Cattell, 2003; Crespo & Dridi, 2007, Chan & Fisher, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Krinsky, 2008; Fanelli, 2009; Grant, 2009; Angell, 2010; Goldacre, 2010, Gutstein, 2009; Healy, 2012; Brownlee, 2015). As mentioned earlier Angell (2010) stepped down as editor of the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, but not before writing an editorial entitled “Is Academic Medicine for Sale.’ She described how until the 1980s, drug companies simply funded research and waited until this was published. However, since then academia has become more dependent on industry and consequently academics are now little more than ‘hired hands who supply human subjects and collect data according to instructions from their corporate paymasters.’ Medical centres increasingly act as if their main objective is to meet the needs of industry.

According to one study, the majority of articles on lucrative pharmaceutical drugs in leading medical journals are likely to be wholly or partially ghostwritten (Healy and Cattell, 2003). “Ghost management” refers to the control of the entire research process by corporate interests. For those conversant with the cosy accommodation between the pharmaceutical industry and the academy in the USA, when the scandal broke over the marketing of *Oxycontin*, the reaction was not one of horror, but of why it took so long for

⁸⁹¹ Oza, A. (2020). Two Professors Faced Years of Harassment for Defying the Fossil Fuel Industry. Now, They Are Reframing the Discussion Around Fracking. *The Cornell Daily*, Nov. 16th.

⁸⁹² Howarth et al, (2015).

something like this to happen. Given this, it is concerning that three big pharmaceutical companies formed partnerships with major universities in the UK in 2016.

The corporatization of higher education has led to a number of articles claiming systematic research bias that has compromised the values that have historically defined scientific research. Academics in finance have also been criticised for having bought into neoliberal rhetoric about efficient markets and by failing to spot the signs of the catastrophic 2008 global financial crash.⁸⁹³ Colander et al (2007) argued the crisis was not foreseen because of a systematic failure by academic economists to construct models which omit the key factors which determine events in the real world. Brownlee (2015) ventured further to argue that the ideals of education have been degraded by corporatisation where academics are no longer free agents who are able to research their personal interests but have been reduced to employees whose role is to meet the targets laid down for them by their 'line' managers.

Engage in Information Warfare

Information warfare involves utilising the full gamut of communication techniques from lobbying, public relations and corporate image advertising through to covert social media campaigns such as that involving Cambridge Analytica in the US election of 2015.

Astroturf marketing

Astroturfing can be a potent means to convince the general public that there is widespread support for a particular viewpoint that is actually lacking which is congenial to the interests of corporations. While its roots probably go back long before this event, it is most prominently associated with the ingenious and infamous staging of the "torches of freedom march" by PR guru Edward Bernays. The aim was to increase the US market for cigarettes by removing the taboo over women smoking in public. To achieve this, Bernays hitched the feminist demand for freedom to smoke to the call for women's suffrage, which was the burning issue of the day.⁸⁹⁴

In response to the circulation of *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore, which summoned attention to the perils of climate change, a twenty-nine-year-old from Beverley Hills produced the spoof "Al Gore's Penguin Army."⁸⁹⁵ On investigation, it turned out that the spoof had actually been produced by the DCI lobbying and PR group employed by Exxon Mobil. *California Drivers Alliance* and *Washington Consumers for Sound Fuel Policy* sprang up rather suddenly in the western United States. On investigation in 2014, it was found that these were amongst fifteen advocacy groups set up by the Western States Petroleum Association (WSPA), which included ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, Shell,

⁸⁹³ Ferguson, Charles (2012) Heist of the century: university corruption and the financial crisis. Guardian, Monday, 21st May. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/may/21/heist-century-university-corruption>. Accessed October 2012.

⁸⁹⁴ Digital History. *Torches of freedom campaign*, University of Ottawa.

⁸⁹⁵ Goldschein, S. (2011). 10 fake grassroots movements started by corporations to sway your opinion. *Insider*, September 30th. <https://www.businessinsider.com/astroturfing-grassroots-movements-2011-9?r=US&IR=T>

ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Occidental. WSSPA used these fake groups as the basis for its claim for grassroots support against legislation on fossil fuel emissions.⁸⁹⁶

More far reaching was the campaign launched by Koch Industries, one of the largest private companies in the USA which owns thousands of miles of oil and gas pipeline. This was prompted when Charles and David Koch learned about the Obama government 'Cap and Trade' Bill, that sought to curb US carbon emissions. Koch had earlier formed *Americans for Prosperity* in 2004, which it then mobilised with the aim to ill the legislation through the dual strategy of a grassroots campaign and by targeting members of Congress. AFP, which now claims 2.3 million members, describes itself as engaging in "broad-based grassroots outreach to advocate for long-term solutions to the country's biggest problems that prevent people from realizing their incredible potential".⁸⁹⁷ From its actions, the main "problems" it has identified include labour unions, healthcare reform and above all, legislation to prevent global heating. In 2008, AFP embarked on the "Hot Air Tour", using a hot air balloon to travel nationwide to promote the slogan, "Global Warming Alarmism: Lost Jobs, Higher Taxes, Less Freedom."

Corporate image advertising

When I worked briefly for an agency linked to Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) it was ruled over by Bob Worcester. Bob, who was trained at Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), enthusiastically promoted the formula "familiarity = favourability" to corporations such as Hoechst, Ciba-Geigy and ICI, that often maintain a "low-profile". The gist of his spiel was that if the name of your corporation seems familiar to the average Joe, then they are more likely to think favourably of it in the unlikely case of a leakage from one of your production plants or God forbid, if a plant were to explode! Conversely, if they know nothing about you, they will look for blood. Bob's aim was of course to persuade executives in these behemoths to invest in an expensive advertising campaign to promote their corporate image, and to monitor this regularly. You are probably familiar with bland statements taken out as one page advertisements by corporations you know little about that inform you of how much good they are doing in the world. In this context I was surprised to hear the announcement from British Petroleum, which had extensively employed corporate image advertising, that it was withdrawing its, *Possibilities Everywhere* campaign. It was difficult to understand the reason why; was it because the corporation was now 'high-profile' and well-known for all the wrong reasons? In a follow-up to the announcement Geoff Morrell, executive vice chair of communications and advocacy at BP wrote that this did not mean that they would stop all advertising, but rather would advocate their "net zero" ambition to, "actively advocate for progressive climate policies, including through advertising".⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁶ Union of Concerned Scientists, (2017). *How fossil fuel lobbyists used "astroturf" front groups to confuse the public*. 17th October.

⁸⁹⁷ <https://americansforprosperity.org/join/>

⁸⁹⁸ Morrell, G. (2020). Didn't bp say no more advertising?' *BP*. 1st October.

Combative advertising

In several papers Supran and Oreskes illustrate how the fossil fuel industry successfully deployed combative advertising over four decades to undermine the consensus reached by IPCC scientists (International Panel for Climate Change) by creating uncertainty.⁸⁹⁹ Together with other tools of information warfare such as greenwashing, this aimed to defuse the stark warning from the IPCC, that the only way for humanity to avoid catastrophe is to wean ourselves off fossil fuels. The authors mention how, when summoned before the US Congress in 2021 to apologize for their egregious campaign of misinformation, the CEOs of the six big oil corporations lied under oath. Survey evidence suggests that the industry campaign has been effective, as even in 2020, while 72 percent of the American public acknowledged that the climate is changing, just 57 percent agreed that this is caused by human activity (Marlon et al., 2020).

The Mobilization of Bias

The fundamental principles of conditioned power were laid down by J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner whom Zuboff (2019) credits for the development of instrumentation power. Although Watson was apparently not a stellar adman when he worked for J Walter Thompson, his theory of classical conditioning explains the widespread use of deficit-solution advertising based on fear and anxiety “appeals”. As pointed out by Pasi Falk(1994), if consumption was just about the satisfaction of needs then advertising would simply inform people of where they can obtain what they require to satisfy those needs. Mainly aimed towards women advertisers first identify or invent a deficit (foul breath, smelly armpits), prior to offering the commodity as the solution towards an imagined perfect self, (‘halitosis? – buy Listerine!’/ ‘BO? Buy Lifebuoy!’). Sometimes the product itself is designed to induce anxiety in this who do not possess it, as for instance when the driver of a small compact observes the rapidly looming form of an SUV approaching in the rear-view mirror.⁹⁰⁰

Operant conditioning has a much wider range of application than its classical cousin by linking primary to secondary stimuli into the chains that form habitual routines.⁹⁰¹ The rules of the ‘drive-thru’, once a novelty in Britain are now taken for granted and we similarly been trained to follow the chains of secondary and primary reinforcers to check our goods at the supermarket and to pre-print our boarding pass and weigh and load our luggage at the airport. The organization of physical and online retail spaces relies on constant surveillance of who visits the store/site in terms of their demographic and

⁸⁹⁹ See Supran, G. & N. Oreskes (2017a, 2017b, 2021) see also Supran & Oreskes, (2021). The Big Oil ads that told us climate change was nothing. *The Guardian*, Nov. 18th. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/18/the-forgotten-oil-ads-that-told-us-climate-change-was-nothing>. This is also illustrated in a PBS Broadcast

⁹⁰⁰ Peretti, J. (2014). SUVs handwash and FOMO: how the advertising industry embraced fear. *The Guardian*, 6th July.

⁹⁰¹ Gordon Foxall and his colleagues at Cardiff University are the ‘go-to’ people for discussion of operant conditioning in marketing contexts ranging from habitual shopping to addiction. Foxall (2008) signalled a change in orientation by permitting a role for intention in his explanation.

lifestyle profile, at what time, and for how long, the nature of their search process, the assortment they select and purchase and how this compares to previous visits, their price elasticity, responsiveness to promotions, return rates, and so forth. Added to this physical and virtual retailers seek to understand the meaning of time pressure (the difference between real and perceived time) on the individual. Dataveillance is used to monitor employees, for instance, sales agents in insurance and real estate with high levels of emotional intelligence are better revenue generators (Kidwell et al., 2011). Aware that customers can find surveillance “intrusive and creepy” Ruckenstein and Granroth (2019) developed the concept of “intimacy of surveillance” to argue for a nuanced idea that this can also involve care and what users want.

Probably the most widely referenced forms of operant conditioning today are the reinforcement schedules built into social media algorithms that drive consumer behaviour to produce valuable data exhaust (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff likens the dynamic of surveillance capitalism to the game *Pokemon Go*, where the real intent to monetize granular information from individual preferences is disguised as ‘free’ and ‘fun’. Can this behaviour by FAANG be described as a conspiracy against unwitting users of Facebook, X, Instagram or Tiktok? While there has been a lot of public disquiet about the effects of social media use on the mental health of children, the general question of surveillance has not aroused much public discussion. Naomi Klein (2023) mentions a guide by the European Commission, which defines a conspiracy theory as, ‘the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent.’ Klein makes a good point in noting that the definition omits the most important aspect of a conspiracy theory, which is whether or not the theory is false or unproven. Her point is that there is ample evidence that many of the actions and events that have steered our lives in the past and which continue to do so today have indeed been subject to covert manipulation by “powerful forces” with negative and sometimes devastating effects for people and for the environment.

Given the flood of reports over the years of industry cabals constituting ‘Big X’ or ‘Big Y’ meeting behind the scenes to ensure the continuation of business as usual, deploying versions of the ‘playbook’ by spreading blatant lies, gladhanding politicians, cajoling or threatening experts who threaten their narrative, deploying their legal muscle by issuing SLAPPs to hound investigative reporters and citizen critics, and so on, is it any surprise that today we are awash in a sea of conspiracy theories where the blatant truth must constantly be denied? Given its antics over the years in seeking to manipulate research in its interests is it any wonder that so many people were highly sceptical of the claims made by the pharmaceutical industry during the Covid pandemic? Additionally, the co-option of academics has done a lot to destroy the reputation of the academic as a neutral observer who stands about the corporate fray. On a more optimistic note it is argued that exposure of the influence of corporate interests on the reporting of science today will educate the citizens and consumers of tomorrow to be more wary of misinformation and disinformation campaigns that appear to be based on scientific logic (Waymer & Hill, 2023).

Corporate misinformation is just one element of a mediascape that has for some time undermined truth through what Giddens calls institutional reflexivity, or constant churn as to what it is that constitutes the good life. Some make the rather obvious point that conspiracy theorists are less likely to engage in politics than others or to reduce their carbon footprint (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Others contend that personality characteristics such as narcissism play a role in those drawn to conspiracy theories (Cichoka et al 2022). That some see conspiracies everywhere also serves the interests of power, that are so close to our noses that we cannot see them although they are so pungent we should surely detect something malodorous. In my experience most of us get more than a whiff of this but choose to ignore it because to do so would defeat our perceived self-interest. For instance, when I mentioned the scurrilous surveillance of Facebook in gathering and monetising her “data exhaust” to my sister she rolled her eyes in response, as in her view Facebook was welcome to gather what to her is a mountain of trivia, so long as it this is “free”. While some might argue that she obviously didn’t get a grip on the “Big Picture” and its consequences, how many of those who supposedly know better stay clear of such engagement? Of course another argument is that given her extensive use of this platform for family and social engagements, between Facebook and ?, there is no choice.

Today, critics such as Naomi Klein themselves brands, although she has sufficient insight to recognize this and confront it. When discussing the differences between her position and that of her doppelganger Naomi Wolf, Klein thinks that the most telling is that Wolf, who is a liberal, sees the handiwork of conspiratorial cabals everywhere, whereas she, Klein, sees nothing more than the everyday operation of capitalism. Wolf became famous for arguing in *The Beauty Myth* that the beauty industry was a conspiracy by men to keep women in their place.⁹⁰² Klein quotes a passage from Wolf which goes, ‘Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that [women] will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring ‘beauties’’.⁹⁰³ However, where Wolf explains the use of anxiety appeals by marketers as a male plot to keep women in their place, Klein sees it instead as simply, “just an example of plain old capitalism doing its thing, finding new and novel ways to commodify every aspect of life.”⁹⁰⁴

From the above we are presented with two arguments In relation to conditioned power, one based on patriarchal exploitation and the other on capitalism. The evidence seems to have tilted in favour of Klein in the years since Wolf wrote *The Beauty Myth* because today it is young men who are under pressure as never before to have a toned, slim but muscled body, teeth that are whiter than white, and coiffed hair.⁹⁰⁵ Klein perhaps puts her finger on the essential difference between reformist and radical thought. The mobilization of bias is in many respects similar to the concept of ideology as formulated by Althusser.

⁹⁰² A variant of this was that the high fashion industry was dominated by gay men who sought to dress women so ludicrously that straight men would lose interest!

⁹⁰³ Klein, (2024: 229).

⁹⁰⁴ Klein, (2024: 229).

⁹⁰⁵ Hobza et al., (2007); Murray & Lewis, (2014).

Given this, a person may actually come to believe in what is against their interest as Wolf suggests, in relation to women who succumb to the beauty myth. Radical explanations reject the idea that such myths are dreamt up and perpetuated by a male cabal but are rather systemic and woven into the fabric of capitalism.

Conclusion

Consideration of the second dimension of power is important as it focuses attention on the construction of barriers against the inclusion or participation of consumers or their representative groups concerning matters that are important to their wellbeing. In the above I have focused narrowly on the role played by corporations and entire industries that have sought to prevent the truth about the harm caused by their products from being made public, and have particularly highlighted the role played by the mobilization of bias in serving the interests of corporations to the detriment of citizens and consumers.

A lot more is now known about the mechanisms employed in the operation of the second dimension of power. From cases involving industries that produce lead, tobacco, alcohol, food, medicines, chemicals and fossil fuels amongst others, it is not that grievances are entirely excluded from discussion but rather that decisions are deferred. Advertising is employed to ensure quiescence amongst consumers and the general public, for instance, by promoting smoking as just one risk amongst many that is also pleasurable and enjoyable; or that in the face of the climate crisis, technology will come to the rescue; or by arguing that beer is a 'social lubricant' in seeking to forestall legislation for alcoholic beverages to carry cancer warning labels.[2] Secondly, whatever the problem, it is individualised by laying it at the door of the consumer. Here consumer 'freedom of choice' is accorded sacral status and solutions, so that for instance, the response to rising levels of obesity and Type-2 diabetes, is to argue over what kind warning labels or 'traffic light' system will best inform the consumers of potential harm. Third, individuals and organisations brave enough action against a corporation or an industry whose product or a process that has been found to cause harm to consumers or to third parties will be met with a formidable corporate response that will include a raft of measures. Fourth, politicians will be co-opted to join the industry side and attempts will be made to co-opt scientists and academics, to ensure that reported findings are favourable, or at least innocuous, to the interests of industry. Finally, in the face of this seemingly overwhelming power of corporations, some individuals will simply anticipate defeat and give up.

While a lot is indeed known about the strategy and tactics of non-decisionmaking, the problem is that the cases we know about happened some time ago. Reading these accounts I was struck by the pervasive feeling I was in the dust-cloud formed by a herd of buffalo that were out of control and rampaging somewhere up ahead, documenting the resultant chaos and carnage caused in their wake, but never catching up. A current instance of the operation of a mechanism that aims to prevent issues from entering the decision-making process by changing the "rules of the game", is the gerrymandering of electoral districts in Texas at the prompting of Donald Trump[1].

I wondered whether the case of Sammy discussed in chapter five might pass muster as an example of conditioned power? Sammy truly believes that he is free to choose, even though the choices he ends up making are ill-informed, capricious and wasteful and he relies absolutely on others to serve the most basic of his needs. But then aren't we all convinced that we are free to choose and aren't most of us also to some extent complicit with industry in knowingly ignoring the messages promoted by public health campaigns?⁹⁰⁶ For instance, while the tobacco industry acted egregiously by advertising smoking as just another risk and that we should enjoy our lives now, government agencies warned at the same time of the dangers of smoking, through gruesomely illustrative health campaigns.⁹⁰⁷ While as consumers, we are directly implicated in being tied to that which we find pleasurable and dangerous, which we paradoxically convince ourselves is the very thing that makes life worth living, requires consideration of human psychology, and the attraction for many of jouissance over health.

Returning to the case of Sammy, Steven Lukes, whose case for three dimensional power is discussed next, argues that Bachrach and Baratz assumes that B's interests are what B takes them to be. For Lukes this is inadequate, as A can also exercise power over B, "by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants".⁹⁰⁸ Luke's page 23. This is discussed next.

⁹⁰⁶ Nordstrom J, L. Thunstrom, K Van 'T Veld J.F. Shorgren & M. Ehmke, (2023). Strategic ignorance of health risk: its causes and policy consequences. *Behavioural Public Policy*. Vol. 7(1):83-114. doi:10.1017/bpp.2019.52

⁹⁰⁷ Ainslie (1975) discusses the role played by temporal discounting which explains why messages such as 'enjoy now, tomorrow is another day' prove to be so alluring for addicts.

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Chapter Eight: Steven Lukes: The Third Dimension of Power

Introduction

In *Power a Radical View* (PRV), Steven Lukes (1974; 2005; 2021) argues for a third dimension of power which operates behind the scenes of liberal and reformist explanations. In this understanding the one-dimensional understanding of power focuses on who prevails in overt settings, while non-decisionmaking is two-dimensional, venturing deeper to consider questions such as who controls the agenda, possessing the power to decide what gets to be decided. For Lukes these explanations focus overmuch on observable conflict between individual actors such that, by tending to ignore the social context of conflicts, they fail to do justice to the role played by power in shaping and infusing the values, beliefs and wants of citizens and consumers.⁹⁰⁸ In contrast, three-dimensional power involves, “the power to secure compliance with the interests of the powerful ... power to secure willing consent by shaping and influencing desires and beliefs, a form of power whose operations or mechanisms are least accessible to direct observation by actors and observers”.⁹⁰⁹

In the latest edition of PRV, Lukes (2021) mentions that the period of the early 1970s, when he was working on the first incarnation of the text, was a time of social ferment and questioning of the legitimacy of the established order by anti-war protestors, feminists and civil rights activists. I might add that this was also a time of flux in marketing presented by the rise of consumerism amid growing disquiet with business and marketing, when the marketing academy was experiencing its own identity crisis. Lukes’ assertion in the latest edition of PRV, that the question of how willing compliance to domination is secured is even more relevant today, is understandable in light of rapid developments in technology involving social media and machine intelligence and of a new diagonalist politics that appears to move well beyond traditional markers between Left and Right.⁹¹⁰

The question posed by Lukes is narrowly specified regarding how the willing compliance of those dominated by power is gained. While the first edition of PRV (Lukes, 1974) was slim, succeeding editions (Lukes, 2005; Lukes, 2021) expanded to include an extended discussion of domination and of Foucault’s theory of power. Given that the next chapter is devoted to discussion of Foucault, the latter’s contribution to Lukes’ thought is discussed here, while Lukes’ critique of Foucault appears in the next chapter. Below I first outline Lukes’ development of the concept of radical power and how this has changed over the years, before turning to briefly outlining the extent to which this might make a useful contribution to critical marketing theory.

⁹⁰⁸ Lukes, (2021: 33).

⁹⁰⁹ Lukes, (2021: 3).

⁹¹⁰ Lukes, (2021: 14).

Given that three-dimensional power is supposedly operative in situations involving the willing compliance of B to act in the interests of A, the question arises as to how to conceptualise and research such apparently pacific relations? Lukes recognizes the importance of developing robust criteria to determine what is really going on amid the swirl of conspiracy theories that invoke the twin spectres of “dark forces” and the “deep state” in any discussion of power today.

In succeeding editions Lukes revised the understanding of the concept of power described in the first edition of PRV. In its first incarnation Lukes (1974), subscribed to Dahl’s idea of power which conceives of it as the overt exercise of power by A over B. Lukes subsequently changed his stance to argue that power is a dispositional concept consisting of a potential and a capacity to gain the compliance of B that A may or may not call on. Moreover, he explained that ‘power-over’ or A/b relations involving the ability to have another person in one’s power is a sub-concept of the broader concept of *potentia*, ‘power-with’.⁹¹¹

This chapter is split into two main sections, of which the first discusses how Lukes builds his account of the third dimension of power over and above that presented by Bachrach and Baratz (1962). Lukes engages in a painstaking step-by-step process that builds from the concept of an authentic human nature developed by Spinoza and the early Marx to consider whether this should be based on identity or on interests. Concluding that real interests form the most secure basis on which to secure authentic human nature he next seeks to justify the need for an external observer in situations where interests conflict, to determine which interests should prevail. Moving onward to discuss domination, which in this instance involves the willing compliance of those whose interests are dominated, he argues that conceptually, this relates to situations where the “least visible forms of power” are at work, so that the interests of those subjected to power are harmed, while those of the powerful are not. The analytic question concerns the mechanisms by which this comes about which are manifold and here he invokes arguments that the rational capacity of those who are dominated is blunted through false consciousness involving processes of mystification.

While this is conceptually dense terrain, I hope that the first part of this chapter conveys something of how Lukes justifies his argument for a third dimension of power. The second part discusses Lukes’ response to criticism of earlier editions of PRV by James Scott and Jon Elster and his justification of the need for a third dimension of power that is separate from the explanations offered by Bourdieu and Foucault.

Hegemony and Consent

Lukes’ key arguments are based on the existence of an authentic, human nature as posited Spinoza and Karl Marx. He was particularly drawn to the explanation developed by Antonio Gramsci to explain how the willing compliance to power can be obtained through the shaping of beliefs and preferences. While in prison Gramsci had grappled with the question of how the willing consent of those subjected to capitalist exploitation is

⁹¹¹ Lukes, (2021: 79).

secured in democratic societies, developing the concept of hegemony as an alternative to materialist arguments that one can read off the ideology of a person from their social class position in a similar way to identifying the numberplate on a car.

Like many lasting concepts, hegemony is sufficiently fuzzy to enable a variety of interpretations. Lukes differentiates a *psychological* (his italics) from a *materialist* conception of ideology. The psychological view involves some form of acceptance, ranging from full-blown incorporation of dominant values to partial compliance, the “idea that the current state of affairs, ‘while shamefully iniquitous’, is nevertheless the only viable form of society’.”⁹¹² On the other hand, for Przeworski, ideological hegemony has a *materialist* basis which consists of the coordination of the real interests of dominant and subordinate groups. In this account the majority of individuals are not duped and so ideology must have some bearing on the expression of a person’s real interests. Przeworski had argued that relations between capitalists and workers are based on endless compromise based on limits that if breached will end in trouble. In this situation the “consent” of the workers is cognitive and behavioural, such that they, “*consent when they choose particular courses of action and when they follow these choices in their practice.*”⁹¹³ Consent in this view thus corresponds to the real interests of those consenting and is always conditional.

In developing his idea of domination as a form of willing compliance, Lukes tends to adopt a psychological understanding of hegemony as the imposition of a coherent dominant consciousness that is tangible and hard-edged and is presented as “common-sense”, against its counterpart in experience that is largely incipient and inchoate. Those subjected to the third dimension of power are open to false consciousness, as their rationality has been compromised as to what constitutes their real interests.

From the Second to the Third Dimension of Power

Lukes criticizes Bachrach and Baratz as being too focused on overt behaviour such as the “concrete decisions” reflecting intentional conscious choices and insufficiently on how the system can operate in ways that are neither conscious nor intentional. Moreover to focus at the level of individual action is misplaced by ignoring the collective power of culture and of social institutions. For Lukes, to describe power as something that is “exercised” is “problematic” because it invites one to think of this in the context of conscious, intentional, action by an individual. In contrast, he argues that one ought to be able to speak of the “exercise” of power by individuals or groups, whether consciously or not.⁹¹⁴ In the case of observable conflict between A and B, where A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do, this invites the counterfactual, that in the absence of A’s action, B have done something different. For instance, home-owner B signs a contract to replace their double-glazing, not because they themselves have spotted some defect, but because the persistent salesperson A, who has sat in their living

⁹¹² Femia in (Lukes, 2021, 12).

⁹¹³ Lukes, (2021: 13).

⁹¹⁴ Lukes, (2021, 46-48).

room for three hours, has persuaded them that this is the case. In this situation the counterfactual is that if let alone, B would not otherwise have signed the contract to buy the windows. However, in situations where there is no observable conflict between A and B, this requires explanation of the counterfactual as to why B would have acted differently, and additionally, the need to specify the mechanisms at work that explain how this happened.

Lukes (2021) draws on Crenson's (1972) study of Gary Indian to illustrate how the third dimension can extend beyond the second dimension of power.⁹¹⁵ Crenson took East Chicago and Gary, two broadly comparable neighbouring cities in Indiana, as the focus for his study of legislation to restrict air pollution. He wondered why it had taken the authorities in Gary until 1962 to enact clean air legislation, fully thirteen years after its counterpart in East Chicago. Crenson argues that the reason for the long delay was because Gary was a "company town" built by US Steel, which was the major local employer and which politically had a strong party organization, while in contrast, East Chicago had a number of steel companies and a diffuse political party structure.⁹¹⁶ Crenson describes how although US Steel ostensibly stayed aloof from the political arena, it had effectively held up legislation on pollution for decades, describing for instance, how, when confronted by activists, company executives, "would agree that air pollution was terrible, then pat you on the head. But they never did anything one way or the other".⁹¹⁷ Lukes explains that US Steel smothered action without needing to enter the discussion, because it had built Gary and was responsible for its prosperity,

Its 'mere reputation for power, unsupported by acts of power' was 'sufficient to inhibit the emergence of the dirty air issue'.⁹¹⁸

Crenson describes how, once it was threatened with action by Federal authorities, US Steel engaged more overtly to delay action to minimize the impact on its business, by arguing that the overt benefits of clean air were relatively weak when compared to the financial cost.⁹¹⁹

⁹¹⁶ Lukes, (2021: 52).

⁹¹⁷ Crenson (1971:76-77 in Lukes, 2021: 52).

⁹¹⁸ Crenson, (1971, 124), in Lukes, (2021 50).

⁹¹⁹ Although Lukes doesn't mention this, I might add a psychological explanation to the above that one might conjecture may have played a role in the almost invisible exercise of power by US Steel in Gary, at least before the Federal authorities became involved. This is based on fear; fear of "sticking one's head above the parapet", of "rocking the boat" by speaking out in public about what is obvious to all in private; fear of losing one's job and therefore one's livelihood, and perhaps the need to locate to another city; and fear too of being ostracised and scapegoated as a pariah by one's workmates, in the face of a concern about pollution that was possibly taken for granted by many as a fact of life, whose lethal effects took years or decades to fulfil. Consider for instance, the argument that collective fear explains the otherwise mystifying and almost universal corporate silence as a literal non-response to the blatant destruction of institutions by the Trump-47 regime.

Building the Case for a Third Dimension of Power

Given that the above events at Gary, Indiana seem almost entirely in keeping with the second dimension of power as non-decision making, what if any is the need for a third dimension of power? Lukes describes the case of Gary as resting on the boundary between a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional level of power. He argues that Crenson's account advances beyond the two-dimensional explanation in three ways; firstly, because it does not describe non-decisionmaking behaviourally, as consisting of decisions; secondly, it is more concerned with the institutional context than with individuals; and thirdly, it involved an 'inarticulate' ideology that can exist in political institutions to promote the selective perception of issues, so that some issues are not raised.⁹²⁰

In relation to institutional power, Lukes argues from Crenson, that the chance that pollution will be taken seriously will be low in the situation where an industry has a high reputation for power and appears to be unconcerned about pollution. Additionally, that Gary had a strong, influential political party system also fostered inaction on this matter because concern about pollution was a silent killer whose mention did not played well into party politics

In discussing the mechanisms of power at work in Gary, Lukes argues that although action to counter pollution would have been a collective good, because the costs of addressing it would have fallen onto the shoulders of US Steel, one would have expected that it would have reacted strongly to any move to counter pollution. Conversely, action against US Steel would have been weak, as the benefits of tackling pollution which accrue over the long run, would be considered vague by comparison to the up-front costs and to day-to-day tussles over "bread and butter" issues. Lukes homes in on Crenson's argument that in the face of the 'diffuse discontent' expressed by citizens, 'selective perception' of important issues was availed of by local political leaders, who exercised considerable control over the issues people were concerned about and how forcefully they expressed their concern.⁹²¹

Returning to a question raised earlier by Lukes, what counterfactual might be offered in the situation of Gary? Lukes argues that in this situation one can assert that power worked against the real interests of Gary's citizens which lay firstly, in their not being poisoned and that it is plausible that if possessed of the right information, they would have opted for clean air legislation, given that this is what had happened in East Chicago thirteen years earlier.⁹²²

Acknowledging that not all situations are as clear-cut as those that pertained in Gary, Indiana Lukes continues that nonetheless, "it is not impossible to adduce evidence" that

⁹²⁰ Lukes, (2021, 52).

⁹²¹ Lukes, 2021, 52-53).

⁹²² Lukes, (2021, 53-54).

is necessarily indirect. He cites Gramsci, who counterposed the intellectual dominance of a subordinated group, by which it seems to willingly submit itself to a view of the world that is not its own, against its own fragmentary conception, which nonetheless has the potential to flare up against the dominant view. He thus argues that one should be alive to how people react to perceived opportunities to escape from subordination, which he discusses in relation to the Indian caste system.⁹²³

From the above, if the first dimension of power concerns overt situations where A prevails over B in relation to a particular decision, and the second dimension describes that where A prevails over B because the item never appears on the agenda, or the decision is delayed through endless deferral, the third dimension involves the power to secure the willing consent of B, “by shaping and influencing desires and beliefs, a form of power whose operations or mechanisms are least accessible to direct observation by actors and observers”.⁹²⁴ To secure his argument for the operation of a power that is more or less invisible requires Lukes to engage in some conceptual heavy-lifting, by discussing power in relation to domination, freedom, rationality, preferences interests, and capabilities.

Domination

In the most recent edition of PRV Lukes (2021) devotes a good deal of space to discuss domination which he acknowledges is an inherently controversial issue as it involves some form of judgement from outside.⁹²⁵ What is domination and how do we know when it is at work? Lukes’ position is similar to that espoused by civic republicans, such as Pettit and Skinner, who associate freedom with non-domination, although while they are concerned with domination of the will, Lukes is concerned with domination of a person’s interests. In his view domination occurs when ‘compliance is secured in conditions that put into question the freely given consent of the person or persons subject to it’.⁹²⁶ He also takes from civic republicanism the argument that power as domination is dispositional, consisting of a potential that may or may not be exercised and which does not have to be willed or intentional as it can be at work in everyday practices that are taken for granted as normal. Referring to C. Wright Mills he argues that viewed in this way power can involve agents who are trapped within exploitative structures such as that experienced by, the exploited worker, the submissive, the undocumented immigrant, the insecure tenant, the indebted wife and indebted student.⁹²⁷

For Lukes the judgement of domination requires making a judgement about how the power of some agents furthers their interests and/or adversely affects the interests of others. Some forms of domination are legitimate, such as that of parents over their children, whilst slavery, serfdom, bonded labour, and the promotion of content by social

⁹²³ Lukes, (2021, 55-57).

⁹²⁴ Lukes, (2021, 4).

⁹²⁵ Lukes, (2021: 116).

⁹²⁶ Lukes, (2021, 163).

⁹²⁷ Lukes, (2021, 164).

media algorithms that encourages self-harm and even suicide amongst children and vulnerable adults, are obviously not.⁹²⁸ What of issues such as the constant self-surveillance and self-policing engaged in by women and increasingly of young men, who nonetheless experience a personal sense of empowerment from so doing? Or of those who voluntarily submit themselves to the perils of plastic surgery in the quest for the mythical “European nose”? Or, those who are subjected to pollution in traffic-ridden cities? Lukes argues the need to draw the line somewhere, suggesting that,

To speak of power as domination is to suggest the imposition of some significant constraint upon an agent or agents’ desires, purposes or interests, which it frustrates, prevents from fulfilment or even from being formulated”⁹²⁹

From this one might ask whether a person’s decision to opt to have their nose remodelled might be understood as an effect of three-dimensional power? While this question is discussed further below, the decoy effect describes more straightforward situations where an inferior option is added to a choice set in order to make another option more favourable.⁹³⁰ In searching for an objective criterion from which to gauge this, Lukes adds, in addition to one having power over another, the claim that those subject to power are rendered *less free*, in Spinoza’s phrase, *to live as their nature and judgment dictate*.⁹³¹

Freedom

In previous chapters the concept of negative freedom as freedom-from, was contrasted to the positive idea of freedom as freedom-to, and negative freedom was further differentiated by contrasting liberal to civic republican understandings of the term. Lukes focuses on the civic republican conception of freedom as non-interference with the realization of one’s preferences such that the individual is considered free to the extent that no-one can prevent them from doing what they prefer to do. He describes this as a minimal understanding of freedom which, in relation to the third dimension of power simply won’t do, as it takes preferences as given rather than as subject to manipulation and as framed by power.

Lukes offers as an example, the situation of a fundamentalist Christian woman whose child is in hospital, whose daughter requires an immediate blood transfusion if she is to live. The mother’s strong preference is that this should not be allowed because it is forbidden by God, but the child’s father wants her to have the transfusion. What is the right thing to do? As I have discovered, this is not an abstract question but a real-life dilemma that has come before the courts. Éloise Dupuis, a 26-year-old Jehovah’s Witness who died after refusing a transfusion, was an adult whom the judge said was “perfectly informed” about the risks involved. On the other hand, when his sixteen-year-old daughter Bethany refused a transfusion Lawrence Hughes claimed, successfully, that

⁹²⁸ Coleman, C. (2022). Social media harm to children. *House of Lords library*, 17th January.

⁹²⁹ Lukes, (2021: 118).

⁹³⁰ Arielly, (1997), Padamar & Dawra, (2024).

⁹³¹ Italics in original.

she had been subjected to years of indoctrination.⁹³² In law parents have the right to make decisions on behalf of their children and civic republicans would argue that their preferences should not be interfered with. Bethany's case was taken to court because husband and wife were on opposite sides of this crucial argument. The case of Bethany Hughes illustrates Lukes' view of the insufficiency of holding to a notion of freedom as non-interference, as it pays no heed to the background conditions of how preferences are formed.

Rather than equating freedom with preferences, Lukes argues from Spinoza, that it is better to consider freedom in relation to authenticity, as being true to one's nature or "self", and to autonomy, or the ability to think independently for oneself. These are in turn linked to the ability to think rationally,

On Spinoza's own account, living (authentically) according to the dictates of one's nature and (autonomously) according to the dictates of one's judgment is to be rational.⁹³³

Spinoza links rationality to freedom, as, 'to use reason correctly': 'those whose reason is most powerful, and who are most guided thereby, are also the most possessed of their own right' (freedom).⁹³⁴ If those who are most possessed of their own "right", and so are best able to think for themselves autonomously are most free, then in situations involving power as domination the ability to reason correctly has been compromised by being blunted and so the individual is "less free, to live as their nature and judgement dictate".

Constructing a Base for Human Nature, Identity vs. Interests

Returning to the above quote from Spinoza, given that the individual subject to power is "less free, to live as their nature and judgment dictate", this raises the question as to how to define human nature? Influenced by Marx, when arguing the need for "humans to live in a truly human way"⁹³⁵, Lukes must settle on what specifically it is that constitutes a distinctively human 'species being' that can be out of kilter with the organisation of life in a capitalistic consumer society?⁹³⁶ The two candidates he selects are discussed briefly below, comprising identity, or the ability for self-recognition, and secondly, real interests.

Identity

Self-identity might be argued as a strong contender to form the basis for a distinctively human nature because, as perspicaciously described by Alain deBotton (2004), beneath the demand for recognition of identity lies the fundamental requirement for love through recognition. To be recognised is to be loved, admired and included by others, against which lack of recognition, as in ostracism, signifies a state that is cut off from being or more precisely signifies non-being, such that at the extreme one does not recognize

⁹³² Smith, S. (2016). Jehovah's Witnesses incapable of free, informed refusal of blood, former adherent says. *CBC News*, Montreal, 31st October.

⁹³³ Lukes, (2021, 120).

⁹³⁴ Spinoza in Lukes, (2021, 120).

⁹³⁵ Lukes, (2021, 122).

⁹³⁶ See for instance, Byron (2016).

oneself as a being. In this context identity-related or recognitional domination discussed by Lukes can occur in situations where the dominant group renders those whom they dominate invisible by projecting their own image as the norm.⁹³⁷

While Lukes points to domination by lack of recognition of a person's ethnic, cultural, religious or geographical identity, Zygmunt Bauman (2017) asserts that in a society where to be someone is to be a consumer, the inadequate, or flawed consumer is constructed as an object for humiliation. In a society where shopping is accorded almost sacral status, the consumption of commodities provides resources for the construction of identity and for achieving social recognition and respect, feeding the fundamental need to be recognised as somebody. In contrast, non-shopping, "is the jarring and festering stigma of a life un-fulfilled – and of one's own nonentity and good-for-nothingness". Referring to the bout of looting and fire-raising of shops by youths who poured into British city-centres from 'sink-estates' in 2011, Bauman contended that this provided a means for the disaffected to express their humiliation and resentment, to destroy what they could not have.⁹³⁸ Similar arguments have been made pertaining to the invisibility of minority group representation in advertising formats and the need for an ethics of representation to acknowledge and remedy this.⁹³⁹

Despite its apparent promise, Lukes rejects identity as a basis for three-dimensional power, firstly, on the grounds that the process of identity formation is ongoing and so is never complete, because those who are dominated never fully internalize the view that is imposed upon them from the outside. Moreover domination can also arise from *excessive* identification which occurs when those Lukes calls identifiers, who are "entrepreneurs and mobilizers of identity politics" come to dominate others who are less committed, indifferent or hostile; "the quasi-identifiers, semi- identifiers, non-identifiers, ex-identifiers, trans-identifiers, multi-identifiers and anti-identifiers".⁹⁴⁰ Thus while acknowledging the importance of identity, for Lukes this cannot provide a sound basis for judging an objective human nature, as there is no basis for judgement that is independent of these "entrepreneurs and mobilizers" of identity. While some may argue that people come to embrace "distorted" identities, the question is "false, distorted and reduced as compared with *what*?⁹⁴¹

⁹³⁷ Lukes, (2021): 123).

⁹³⁸ Bauman, (2017: 52). Fiske (1989) described shop-lifting as a form of resistance by the dispossessed against the capitalist system. During the early days of the Northern Ireland "troubles" I remember joyous accounts by youthful (middle-class) visitors to Derry of their consumption of food and alcohol "liberated" from "capitalists". Scroll forward from 1970 to the mid-1990s by which time several of the small shopkeepers of the 1970s had given up and youths intent on attacking the new Foyle side centre populated by "British" stores were confronted by angry local women.

⁹³⁹ See for example, Borgerson, (2002), Schroeder & Borgerson, (2015). The situation began to change in the UK following the passage of the Equality Act (2010) and in particular since publication of the report by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) on gender stereotyping, See ASA (2017). *Depictions, deceptions, and harm*, 18th July. See also, ASA, (2025). *Celebrating diversity in advertising*. CAP News, 10 Jul 2025.

⁹⁴⁰ Lukes, (2021: 125).

⁹⁴¹ Lukes, (2021: 126).

Real Interests

Lukes discusses interests as a second potential criterion on which to base human nature. He rejects the Benthamite view that the individual should automatically be considered as the best judge of her or his interests and that these can be revealed through our subjective preferences, for instance, by voting for a political party, or as displayed through our market behaviour. Reliance on preferences cannot be justified if one is to maintain the existence of three-dimensional power which holds that B's compliance to domination by A is gained because their very wants have been shaped by A, as in the above case of the blood transfusion. There thus arises a latent conflict between B's *expressed* interests (which operate in the interest of A) and B's *real* interests, of which B may not be consciously aware.

Because power operates to gain the willing compliance of B, the third dimension described by Lukes is thus an eerily silent place that is free from the clamour of dissent and resistance. The apparent silence of B in such instances presents a smooth surface for the researcher, as there is nothing of substance to latch onto. Here power is better thought of as a potential that consists of A's capacity to secure B's compliance, which, 'can operate unobserved and behind our backs and may be at its most effective when least observable to agents and observers alike.'⁹⁴² Indeed, while interests are often consciously expressed, "power as domination invites the idea of constraint upon interests and to speak of the third dimension of power is to speak of interests imputed to and unrecognized by the actors".⁹⁴³

When stating the need to think of interests 'imputed' to the actors, Lukes is arguing that the determination of a person's real interest requires a view from the outside. However, given that real interests can be framed in different ways, there is no canonical set that will provide the last word on the matter. In searching for criteria on which to base real interests, he discusses the capabilities approach initiated by Amartya Sen (1985) as refined by Martha Nussbaum (2000), which holds that a person's welfare interest is fundamentally important, as the capacity to lead a worthwhile life depends on a person's access to welfare through their access to an adequate level of shelter, nourishment and health-care. Nussbaum borrowed from Aristotle, and from Marx, the notion that certain capabilities make us 'truly human', which Lukes paraphrases to assert that domination occurs where the power of some affects the interests of others by restricting their capabilities for "truly human" functioning, he maintains that such welfare interests are not preference-dependent and so can be thought of as real, objective freedoms.

From the above, welfare interests are the necessary conditions that need to be present to ensure human welfare, constituting what individuals generally need in order to live lives that are satisfactory, as 'primary goods' that serve 'basic needs'.⁹⁴⁴ These are all various ways of specifying conditions that enable a person to pursue their various purposes and

⁹⁴² Lukes, (2021: 2).

⁹⁴³ Lukes, (2021, 152).

⁹⁴⁴ Lukes, (2021, 86).

conceptions of what makes life valuable, and without which that pursuit is frustrated or severely impeded.⁹⁴⁵ Wellbeing interests are linked to welfare interests in that, if the latter provide the capacity to live a good life, then wellbeing interests pertain to the living of that life.⁹⁴⁶

From Sen and Nussbaum⁹⁴⁷ Lukes argues that when considering questions such as that of the Christian believer whose child is in need of a blood transfusion, one is on the territory of interests and of a conflict between two sets of interests comprising wellbeing and welfare interests. For Jehovah's Witnesses wellbeing interests can be thought of as 'meta-preferences' linked to long-term goals involving faith and spiritual wellbeing and related to the need to live a life that is worthwhile. For these believers the religious beliefs that underscore their wellbeing interests are weighted more heavily than are their welfare interests which provide the necessary conditions for day-to-day survival that provide the capacity to lead a worthwhile life in the first place, such as health, adequate nourishment, bodily integrity, shelter, personal security, and an unpolluted environment.

Lukes acknowledges that there are many different ways for one to lead a life that is worthwhile and indeed that people can prefer to lead lives that are against what they may recognize to be their wellbeing. As discussed further below, rather than asking the individual subject about their preferences, he invokes the need for an external perspective, that considers what benefits or harms them.⁹⁴⁸ Moreover, if one adopts a rational choice framework then one ought to be able to identify real interests where B has relative autonomy to make choices independent of A's power.⁹⁴⁹ Such power is not necessarily detrimental to interests, as for instance, in the situation of authority, when a parent such as Lawrence Hughes has the right to determine whether or not his daughter should have a transfusion, or when passengers travelling in vehicles are ordered to wear a seatbelt.

Relative Autonomy and Real Interests

Lukes cites Perry Anderson's (1976) reading of Gramsci, which describes the consciousness of the working class as contradictory, split between the ideology imposed on them by the ruling class and the fragmentary and incoherent 'commonsense' that comprises an alternative nascent consciousness.⁹⁵⁰ This notion of a contradictory consciousness can accommodate itself to other contexts such as that involving the fundamentalist Christians described earlier. However, as mentioned above, rather than conceive of a dual relation, Lukes acknowledges the complex nature of interests, that, 'of course, social actors do not have unitary or dual, but multiple and conflicting interests of

⁹⁴⁵ Lukes, (2021, 86).

⁹⁴⁶ Lukes, (2021, 87).

⁹⁴⁷ See for instance, Nussbaum & Sen, (1993).

⁹⁴⁸ Lukes, (2021: 85).

⁹⁴⁹ Lukes, (2021: 40-42).

⁹⁵⁰ Lukes, (2021, 149).

different kinds, and their identities are not confined to their imputed class positions and destinies.”⁹⁵¹

In Lukes’ framework judgements to establish the counterfactual as to whether or not B’s interests are real, of which interest from a conflicting set should count, and the extent to which B’s relative autonomy has been compromised, require the presence of an external perspective. How this squares with his argument that the determination of real interests is up to B, “exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy’ is discussed next.⁹⁵²

The Need for an External Standpoint

in the first edition of PRV Lukes had stated that, “When I say something is in your interest means that the individual has a “prima facie” claim to it” (Lukes, 1974, 34), describing how liberals, reformist and radicals would define such an interest in different ways. As noted by Stewart Clegg (1989), this formulation of interests leaves Lukes open to the charge of conventionalism, as in this “prima facie” understanding, the meaning of one’s interests will vary depending on the stance one adopts to define them and relatedly, will leave one open to the charge moral relativism. Lukes’ (2021) subsequent argument of the need for an external perspective might thus be seen as an attempt to provide a more secure basis for real interests.

If compliance to domination is obtained by shaping B’s beliefs and desires, then there is little point in asking B about their situation, because they are more or less immersed in the dominant ideology. Lukes (2021) contends that such compliance to domination requires an external perspective and the formation of criteria against which to judge the extent to which such compliance works against a person’s real interests,

the very idea of power’s third dimension requires an external standpoint. Power as domination, I have argued, invokes the idea of constraint upon interests, and to speak of the third dimension of such power is to speak of interests imputed to and unrecognized by the actors.⁹⁵³

He refers to the study conducted by Martha Nussbaum (2000) and particularly to her account of the plight of women in Andhra Pradesh who had no property rights, no education, no legal right of divorce and who were likely be beaten if they sought work outside the home.⁹⁵⁴ She noted that it was scarcely surprising to find that these women espoused traditional values of purity, modesty and self-abnegation. What is interesting to Lukes is Nussbaum’s argument that when these women were eventually persuaded to engage in development groups which provided physical and mental distance from their immediate situation, the women quickly lost their sense of deference.⁹⁵⁵ Nussbaum concluded that just because people have no options, one should reflect before deciding that they unequivocally endorse the situation in which they find themselves.

⁹⁵¹ Lukes, (2021, 150).

⁹⁵² Lukes, (2021, 152).

⁹⁵³ Lukes, (2021, 151).

⁹⁵⁴ Nussbaum, (2000: 43), in Lukes, (2021: 151).

⁹⁵⁵ In Lukes (2021: 151).

One can see the attraction of this case as an illustration of Lukes' argument from Spinoza, that those subjected to power are, "rendered *less free... to live as their nature and judgment dictate*."⁹⁵⁶ Their case might stand as an instance when an embryonic subordinated ideology flares briefly to assert itself against the dictates of a dominant patriarchal ideology that has almost smothered it. Lukes invokes this as an example of relative autonomy, where the space afforded by the development groups enabled them to speak freely and thus to establish the counterfactual to the assertions that these normally quiescent women are content with their lot. In discussing the role played by the groups in consciousness-raising, Nussbaum and Lukes are implicitly referring to what psychologists call Theory of Mind, or the reflexive ability to view oneself from a third-person perspective as an object for self-reflection. By providing a separate space for collective discussion of their situation it is argued that the women were thus opened to the possibility of self-transformation.

In reaching towards a fuller concept of freedom, Lukes turns to Martha Nussbaum's criticism of the minimalist conception of freedom as freedom from interference on the ground that it ignores "unjust background conditions" which can distort a person's capacity to judge, thus inviting a more holistic and expansive understanding of freedom. He invokes Spinoza, for whom freedom relates to authenticity and to rationality, "living (authentically) according to the dictates of one's nature and (autonomously) according to the dictates of one's judgment is to be *rational*."⁹⁵⁷ Unperturbed by the palpable feeling of discomfiture that might be induced in those of a nominalist disposition, Lukes proceeds to define human nature and rationality. He turns to the concerns espoused by the young Marx in relation to how to live in a "truly human" manner. Described above, as framed by Nussbaum, the material and social necessities that must be in place for a person to live a life that is fit for a human being who is treated as an end in themselves and not as the means to the end of another; conceived of as being capable of forming their own opinions, making their own choices and developing their potential in relation to living amongst others. From the above, subjection to domination restricts the ability of the subject to reason correctly.

Gaining Willing Compliance to Domination

Domination plays a key role in the final instance as it, 'can work against people's interests by stunting, diminishing and undermining their powers of judgment and by falsifying, distorting and reducing their self-perceptions and self-understanding'⁹⁵⁸. Lukes clarifies this by asserting that domination signifies that compliance is secured *in conditions that put in question* the freely given consent of the person or persons subject to it".⁹⁵⁹ He differentiates domination from compliance, arguing that while domination can involve

⁹⁵⁶ Lukes, (2021, 120).

⁹⁵⁷ Lukes, (2021: 120).

⁹⁵⁸ Lukes, (2021: 129).

⁹⁵⁹ Lukes, (2021): 163).

coercion, compliance may result from a person being confronted with an unfavourable set of options from which to choose, or by misleading them as to what their options are.

Lukes argues that when asking how the powerful secure the compliance (unwilling or willing) of those they dominate is actually to ask two questions, one conceptual and one analytic. The conceptual question is how one is to know that such power is at work?

And, since such power consists in the ability to bring about significant outcomes, that means that power as domination will be present wherever it furthers, or does not harm, the interests of the powerful and bears negatively upon the interests of those subject to it.⁹⁶⁰

The second, analytic, question concerns the mechanisms by which power achieves its effects? Lukes draws on Spinoza, who differentiates power over the body from that over the mind and regarding the latter, argues that the arbiter of human power or *potentia* is strength of mind, as those who are most guided by it are most fully possessed of their own right (freedom). Operating to curtail this freedom are the manifold means deployed by power to undermine rationality, given, again quoting Spinoza, ‘a man’s judgement can be influenced in many ways, some of them hardly credible’.⁹⁶¹

Having rejected what he calls the minimal understanding of freedom associated with liberal and civic republican thought, Lukes calls for an alternative that acknowledges *internal constraints* (his italics) imposed in relation to ‘the formation of preferences’, ‘internalization’ and ‘hegemony’.” To do so he avers can explain how, “domination can work against a person’s interests by stunting, diminishing and undermining their powers of judgment and by falsifying, distorting and reducing their self-perceptions and self-understanding.”⁹⁶²

Lukes distances himself from the “numberplates on back”⁹⁶³ theory of ideology according to which the individual ought to be stamped with the ideology that is appropriate to their social class position.⁹⁶⁴ He also refuses Foucault’s position argument as power is omnipresent, and we are all caught up in its web there is no escaping domination

Mystification and False Consciousness

While acknowledging the deep unpopularity of this ‘discredited notion’ which today appears patronising and presumptuous and for which he has frequently been criticised, Lukes doubles down on his argument for the role “false consciousness” in the third dimension of power.⁹⁶⁵ He might scarcely have been surprised, given that this can summon the image of the individual as a brainwashed dupe, taking us back to Goebbels’ contention that ‘people are just a gramophone recycling back public opinion’, or to

⁹⁶⁰ Lukes, (2021: 91).

⁹⁶¹ Lukes, (2021: 92).

⁹⁶² Lukes, (2021: 128-129).

⁹⁶³ See discussion of Poulantzas in Eagleton’s (1994) chapter on Althusser (ch. 5).

⁹⁶⁴ Lukes, (2021, 127).

⁹⁶⁵ Lukes, (2021, 16).

Marcuse's 'one-dimensional man'.⁹⁶⁶ On the other hand, the remarkable openness of individuals today to disinformation circulated through social media fora and the rapid spread of bizarre conspiracy theories such as QAnon can give one pause for thought.

In contrast to Marcuse, Lukes argues that false consciousness is limited, as the third dimension of power is always about particular domains of experience and is never entirely effective. Additionally, he argues that it is mistaken to crudely counterpose 'willing' against 'unwilling' compliance to power as.

...mutually exclusive: one can consent to power and resent the mode of its exercise. Furthermore, internalized illusions are entirely compatible with a highly rational and clear-eyed approach to living with them.⁹⁶⁷

He refers to Susan Bordo (2003) who argued that just because women buy into fitness and beauty regimes does not mean that they are somehow 'cultural dopes'. Bordo is referring to the context of those who submit their bodies to the perils and rigours of plastic surgery in their quest for a "European Nose". She mentions that whilst some are mystified by believing that the craze for fitness is purely about health or that "correcting" for one's nose is just a matter of personal preference, others are highly conscious and are not dopes when they decide to embark on such as course of action because they "*know* the routes to success in this culture".⁹⁶⁸

In the context of three-dimensional power, rather than enhancing the freedom of the individual, marketing technology can be deployed to undermine that of the individual by interfering with their reason, by inducing failures of rationality leading to the individual becoming a dupe of the marketer. When Lukes speaks of false consciousness he has something specific in mind pertaining to how power can mislead by blunting the capacity for rational evaluation. Mechanisms that can act as blocks to effective reasoning can include the manipulation of language through the promotion of misleading ideas as to what is "natural", or by promoting illusory ideas about the sort of life that is dictated by a subject's 'nature'.⁹⁶⁹ As recognised by Spinoza, a variety of means are at the disposal of an A who wants to interfere with the reasoning of a given B given that, 'a man's judgment can be influenced in many ways, some of them hardly credible'.⁹⁷⁰

Reflecting briefly on this in the context of marketing, "natural" must be one of the most widely abused signifiers that has been associated with some of the most unnatural products. Off the top of my head I can think of an advertisement for a brand of menthol cigarettes where the product was depicted against a background of waterfalls and another depicting an individual wearing *Lynx* deodorant who merges into a tree, never mind those all advertisements for water bottled in plastic containers that are promoted as

⁹⁶⁶ Quote from Pomerantsev, (2024, 198).

⁹⁶⁷ Lukes, (2021, 155).

⁹⁶⁸ Bordo, (2003, 30).

⁹⁶⁹ Lukes, (2021: 120).

⁹⁷⁰ Lukes, (2021, 92, 150).

pure and natural and ads for sugar-laden *Naked* and *Innocent* juice. Do consumers buy into such imagery? It seems we do.⁹⁷¹

Lukes very briefly alludes to mechanisms that lead to the failures of rationality that are at work in self-deception, such as wishful thinking, cognitive biases, fallacies and illusions, ignorance of the principle of statistical inference and so on. Thanks to the research of behavioural psychologists many biases are now well-known. He suggests that one can school oneself so as to be less susceptible to their blandishments, although in my understanding, as when viewing gestalt images, knowledge of their operation does not necessarily lead to one being less susceptible to their influence. On the other side, Lukes points to the 'phalanxes' of advertisers and PR specialists schooled in the arts of persuasion and dissimulation in their advancement of sectional interests.

Some Examples

Near the end of his book Lukes discusses Zuboff's (2019) argument, that users of social media act as agents playing one game, while they simultaneously comprise the stakes in another game that is played out between companies.⁹⁷² One of Zuboff's examples describes how *Pokemon Go* encouraged its online users to engage in a game that involved visiting real-life destinations.⁹⁷³ She explains how participants provided the stakes in another game which involved being steered to locations won by operators engaged in a bidding war over business opportunities. As Lukes surmises, the idea of using a treasure hunt as a means to improve business is not novel. Anat Rosenberg (2022) describes the ruse devised by the Harmsworth brothers in 1904 to revive the fortunes of the flagging *Weekly Dispatch* newspaper they owned. They contrived to hide medallions of £10 to £50 across Britain, for which clues were listed in the newspaper every week. This resulted in such a massive upsurge in demand that the presses could not cope, such that the ensuing shortage of newspapers led to an angry mob besieging the publishing house and breaking its windows, with the rapid development of a secondary market where original papers were sold at a premium. In their clamour for the coveted treasure crowds overturned paving stones, destroyed fences and walls and dug up public parks, going so far as to invade hospitals and private property in their clamour for the coveted treasure.

Laying aside the social media context, a major difference between the actions of the Harmsworth brothers compared to *Pokemon Go* is that their aim, which was to increase sales of their flagging publication, was more transparent than in the latter. Rosenberg seems to disagree with such a conclusion, arguing that while financial reward was important to those who engaged in the hunt, this was fuelled by a sense of play and adventure, forming part of a wider process of enchantment by advertising, and that the

⁹⁷¹ Rock, A. (2016). Consumer Reports Peeling Back the 'Natural' Food Label. *Consumer Reports*, 27th January.

⁹⁷² Lukes, (2021, 174-180).

⁹⁷³ Zuboff, (2019: 314)

imaginary worlds created by advertisers matched the desire of consumers to be enchanted.

In further exploring how willing compliance to domination was gained through instrumentarian power. Lukes compares the situation of a Czechoslovakian greengrocer in the Soviet era described in a story by Vaclav Havel, with Zuboff's (2019) account of the situation of the consumer of technology today. Havel's story compares those who spoke out against the totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia to the actions of a greengrocer who meekly acceded to requests to place pro-Party posters in his window. Lukes argues that although he had at first agreed, he later came to realise that Havel's portrayal was unfair to the greengrocer, because everyone who lived in Czechoslovakia at the time was familiar with the "rules of the game that all were required to play." He contrasts this with the situation of the consumer who knows very little about the digital world and the mechanisms by which power operates. Zuboff (2019) developed the concept of instrumentarian power to describe this power which involves, "the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization and control."⁹⁷⁴ Lukes takes up Zuboff's theme to argue that this operates according to a logic of operant conditioning, which systematically and predictably shapes behaviour in the interest of profit and differs from totalitarianism as it forms an attempt to transform the market into, "a project of total certainty".

Lukes is critical of some aspects of Zuboff's description of instrumentarian power. As mentioned above, he does not agree that this is new and unprecedented. Secondly, he argues that Zuboff is unclear when describing how this shapes our behaviour while simultaneously evading our awareness. He suggests that what Zuboff really views as new and unprecedented is not the mechanism of power but rather its increasing scope and effectiveness. This is based on the growing accuracy of predictions based on the extraction and analysis of mega-data and secondly, on the scope of the mechanism that enables millions to be herded towards pre-ordained outcomes (Zuboff, 2019: 428). Additionally, AI algorithms that were initially modelled on behaviour during the "war on terror", are now moving beyond the understanding and control of those who design them,⁹⁷⁵

a new form of collectivism in which it is the market, not the state, which concentrates both knowledge and freedom within its domain'⁹⁷⁶ ...Now '[s]urveillance capitalists claim the freedom to order knowledge, and then they leverage that knowledge advantage in order to preserve and expand their freedom'.⁹⁷⁷

Lukes argues that Zuboff's explanation is limited in its scope in that this form of power has been present for some time in our everyday lives. While she focuses on the effects on individuals who are no longer sovereign consumers, Lukes argues that her account can be further "darkened and deepened" by seeing how far the development of targeting

⁹⁷⁴ Zuboff, (2019, 352).

⁹⁷⁵ Zuboff, (2019, 484).

⁹⁷⁶ Zuboff, (2019, 504).

⁹⁷⁷ Zuboff, (2019, 498).

people with greater precision reaches into the daily lives of individuals. Like Zuboff who noted how AI predictions can far exceed human powers, what then of the inbuilt biases inscribed into AI models that can worsen the lives of many? Power for instance is at work in controlling access to credit and to healthcare and its effects on political campaigning have also been huge, as attested to by the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal.

In discussing the extent to which instrumentarian power can be described as three dimensional, Lukes asks how can the remarkable spread of neo-liberal values around the world be explained by hegemony? He argues that the actions of the powerful are largely invisible, opaque, inaccessible, or hidden from view. As with *Pokemon Go* consumers are engaged in a game, but not the game they think they are playing. However, while Zuboff says that this occurs by coercion, Lukes argues that it is actually secured by consent, offering itself as a form of benign reciprocity when one signs up for a “free” service in response to a friend’s invitation to join a community.⁹⁷⁸ If this is robbery, Lukes suggests it is encased in a velvet glove, in relation to which he references Fourcade and Klutz, who describe this as a, ‘Maussian bargain’ which masks the structural asymmetry between giver and gifted, where the “free service” is reciprocated by the user’s personal data which is then transformed into a new commodity which incorporates them into a new arena where they are locked in by the gift-like structure and have little control. Lukes takes this further, quoting William James to argue that there is a new “competition for attention through distraction”⁹⁷⁹ as a form of manipulation of the will”, which extends deeper than the behavioural modification Zuboff describes, as it impairs one’s capacity to engage in immediate tasks and to engage in longer term projects and higher goals.

Lukes’ Response to Criticism

Given that Lukes (2021) devotes a considerable amount of space to defending his argument from criticism and to differentiate it from others in this part, I first discuss his response to the criticism from James Scott, that individuals are found to covertly resist domination by others even in the most trying of situations and additionally, that Lukes’ arguments for “thick” mystification through ideology cannot be substantiated. I then outline and discuss John Elster’s argument that there is no imposition of power in the situations described by Lukes as these are better described as instances of sour grapes where individuals voluntarily refuse what they are refused. Following this I discuss Lukes’ discussion of Bourdieu and Foucault, where he finds much to admire, but nonetheless argues that each suffers from particular failings which can be compensated for by accepting his argument for a third dimension of power.

Lukes wants to know how beliefs and desires can be shaped by external factors,

A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? (Lukes, 2021:30,140).

⁹⁷⁸ Lukes, (2021: 179).

⁹⁷⁹ Lukes, 2021, 180).

This invites the question as to whether consumers in affluent democracies ought to be considered as a contented mass that willingly acquiesces to the subordination of their interests? This begs the question whether people really are as quiescent as some might imagine? Lukes must counter arguments from James Scott, that individuals are constantly resisting and from John Elster, that they are not dominated.

James Scott: Thin and Thick Mystification

James Scott (1990), distinguishes ‘thin’ from ‘thick’ mystification in his argument that resistance is ubiquitous. Thin mystification involves situations where the suborned individual presents an enthusiastic public face to power whilst simultaneously dissenting from this in private, summed up in the adage, ‘When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts’.⁹⁸⁰ Scott concludes that the researcher who witnesses the overt public performance can fail to spot the covert private script and so can miss observing crucial acts of insubordination. I should mention that in this instance Scott is referring to contexts of slavery and indentured labour where the suborned individual is far removed from the situation of the citizen-consumer living in an affluent democracy. As Marx might well have noted, Scott’s descriptions of such extreme forms of servitude are better fitted to the situation of those who toil in the ultimate service of the consumer, labouring in the vast mines where mineral wealth is generated, or in the factories that produce consumer or phones and other products, or who moderate social media content.⁹⁸¹ Indeed many, if not most, of those who risk their lives to gain entry to affluent countries are motivated by concerns of security and material well-being that is sorely lacking in their home setting.⁹⁸²

For Scott (1990), the thick version of mystification means that those who are dominated are persuaded actively to believe in the values that explain their subordination, a situation which he characterises as extremely unlikely. Scott based his “thick” form of false consciousness on the dominant ideology thesis (Althusser, 1971) and specifically on the role of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as family, educators, priests, journalists

⁹⁸⁰ Lukes, (2021: 130).

⁹⁸¹ For example, in relation to mobile technologies see for a selection, Greenfield, Nicole, (2022). Lithium Mining Is Leaving Chile’s Indigenous Communities High and Dry (Literally), *NRDC*. April 26th. Murgia, M. (2024), AI can do harm when people don’t have a voice”, *LSE Blogs*, March 25th. Murgia focuses on the effects on content moderators for *Youtube* and *Facebook* based in Kibera Nairobi. Although they are paid a living wage, their role is to remove extreme content featuring scenes of animal and human torture and child pornography for the benefit of affluent consumers. A further instance features Foxconn, notorious for its treatment of workers in China. See, Jutta Steinruck, (2013). Exploitation of workers in the company Foxconn in the Czech Republic, *European Parliament*, parliamentary question E-010973/2013: Rule 117. Also, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-7-2013-010973_EN.html?redirect. Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, (2017) conducted an ethnography of the plight of *Foxconn* employees in Czechia (see end refs.). China Labor Watch (CLW), reported that half of the 200,000 Apple workforce at the Foxconn plant in Zhengzhou were ‘dispatch’ workers lacking full employment rights and that, “despite apple’s pledges to improve conditions, our investigation finds that core labour issues remain”. (Olcott, E., (2025). Poor work conditions alleged at China’s mega iPhone factory, *Financial Times*, 27th-28th September, 14.

⁹⁸² See for example, European Parliament, (2024). Exploring migration causes: Why people migrate. Updated 16th April.

and politicians in inculcating the dominant ideology into the masses. Together these comprise a near monopoly over symbolic production which gains the willing consent of subordinate groups to the conditions of their subordination.

As examples of misrepresentation in liberal democracy Scott cites the promulgation of beliefs in equality of opportunity, of an open political system and 'commodity fetishism', which have the cumulative effect of masking economic inequality, stigmatizing the poor as being entirely responsible for their poverty and misrepresenting low wages and unemployment as caused by natural and not social forces.⁹⁸³ Scott's aim is to puncture this ideological balloon by referring to the influential paper by Abercrombie and Turner (1972), who argued that the dominant ideology is most effectively transmitted to members of the dominant class fraction and that there is no evidence that this is the case with members of subordinate classes where one or another form of resistance will be observed.⁹⁸⁴ Scott dismisses both thin and thick forms of false consciousness in contexts of gross exploitation to argue that while the oppressed individual may avoid explicit insubordination in the face of power, an almost universal resistance is bubbling away just under the surface. Firstly, pointing to slave and peasant uprisings as evidence, he asserts that this is because it is always possible for an individual who is oppressed to imagine an alternative social order. Secondly, compliance is a matter of the rational deployment of strategy and tactics rather than consent or resignation. He concedes a 'paper-thin' notion of hegemony where an individual might accept or even justify the condition of their subordination if they are granted the prospect of upward mobility.

Lukes, while acknowledging that Scott's analysis may be convincing in the context of peonism or slavery, is concerned by his generalisation to contexts of conformance to power that occur in the absence of coercion. In particular, he argues that Scott fails to answer the fundamental question he poses, which is the quiescence of those subjected to domination. Asking why subordinate groups comply with dominant interests and do not continuously rebel, he muses on several possibilities; either they get something in return for their subordination, or they actually do rebel covertly, alternatively, perhaps the costs of resistance are too high; or finally, they are mystified by the dominant ideology and so are consequently unaware of their true interests.⁹⁸⁵ He concludes that because the situation is complex, not least because individuals have multiple and sometimes conflicting interests, all of these explanations can be true to one extent or another.

⁹⁸³ Scott, (1990: footnote 3: 72).

⁹⁸⁴ I might add two illustrative cases that suggest that the academic consensus on this question can be mistaken. Firstly, Theodore Roszak (1969) in his work on the 1960s counterculture mentions that academics in the late 1950s had no idea of what was going to hit them in the 1960s as they presumed that the youth of their day was conformist and docile. The second example relates to descriptions of population of the Soviet Union prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The overwhelming consensus amongst Western academics and intellectuals at the time was that the Soviet populace was passive and content, consisting of a mass of brainwashed atheists. Together these strongly suggest that intellectuals are not immune from the realms of bias, fantasy and groupthink that affect ordinary mortals. See for example, Gaddis, J.L. (1992-3) *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War. International Security*, vol. 17: 5-58 and Cox, M. (2008). 1989 and why we got it wrong. (*Working Paper Series of the Research Network 1989*, 1). Berlin. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-16282>

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

However, in relation to the radical explanation of power he singles out the role of mystification in shaping perceptions, beliefs and preferences as playing a central role.⁹⁸⁶

Jon Elster: Adaptive Preferences

When making his argument for thin ideology as a form of fatalistic resignation to one's lot, Scott cites luminaries such as Anthony Giddens, Paul Willis and Pierre Bourdieu who variously argue that arbitrary class divisions become naturalized so that in Bourdieu's words, the individual learns, "to refuse what is refused and to love the inevitable" (Scott, 1990: 75). This point is taken up by John Elster who, in his critique of Lukes argues that adaptive preferences rather than domination may better explain what is going on in Lukes' supposed third dimension. Elster employs the fable of the fox and the sour grapes to explain his point. A fox spies a vine with a delicious bunch of grapes hanging overhead, but no matter what ploy he resorts to in order to grasp them, the grapes remain tantalisingly just out of reach. Defeated, in a classic demonstration of cognitive dissonance, the fox concludes that the grapes are sour and so are of no use to anyone. Adaptive preferences thus describe how an individual or a group can adjust their preferences to their circumstances, or their aspirations to their possibilities. Elster sums this up as follows,

It is an effect not a cause of a restricted feasible set; from manipulation in that it is endogenous; from character planning in that it is causal; and from wishful thinking in that it concerns the evaluation rather than the perception of the situation.⁹⁸⁷

Elster argues that we tailor our aspirations to their possibilities. Preferences may be the cause of a restricted set of options as in the decision to marry, or they may arise as the result of a restricted set. In the latter case adaptive preference formation takes place "behind one's back" by a non-conscious causal mechanism he likens to cognitive dissonance,

The process then is regulated by something like a drive. To bring home the reality of the distinction between drives and second-order wants, consider counter-adaptive preferences. No one could choose such preferences, and so they can only be explained by some kind of perverse drive, of which it can be said, metaphorically speaking, that it has the person, rather than the other way around.⁹⁸⁸

Whereas deliberate character planning involves a person upgrading the accessible options, in contrast, adaptive preference change consists of downgrading the inaccessible options ('sour grapes').

In his critique, Elster asks whether, in his discussion of domination, Lukes proposes a purposive, or a functional, explanation of wants? From a purposive perspective, do rulers really have the power to deliberately induce certain beliefs, or does Lukes mean that certain desires and beliefs have beneficial consequences for them, and if the latter, do these consequences explain their causes? Elster is sceptical about the purposive

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid., 14

⁹⁸⁷ Elster, 1981, 226).

⁹⁸⁸ Elster, (1981, 224).

proposal that rulers can actually induce in others those beliefs and preferences that serve their interest. He acknowledges that they may do so through their behaviour, “but only on the condition that they do not deliberately try to induce this goal”. In relation to the functional explanation, he acknowledges that while adaptive preference formation may result in consequences that are beneficial to the rulers, these do not explain how the preferences came to be held in the first place. It is good for the rulers that the lower classes are content with little, “but what explains it is that it is good for the subjects”, as, “frustration would be psychologically intolerable to the ruled”.⁹⁸⁹

Elster locates something excessive in adaptive preferences that is apparent in the tendency for them to overshoot their mark, for instance, in the case of an excessive meekness. In the context of consumption this is captured by Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of *amor fati*, or the ‘taste of necessity’.⁹⁹⁰ *Amor fati* can be considered as a form of sour grapes, given Bourdieu’s description of the French working class, ‘taste for what they are already condemned to’, such that some exhibited a “pathological or morbid preference for (basic) essentials, a sort of class coarseness, the pretext for a class racism which associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat.”⁹⁹¹ As an indication of excess, Bourdieu at one point vividly describes how the working class men he interviewed celebrated “champion chompers” such as Francois Bruat, who ate 2.7 kilos of beans in fifteen minutes, while denigrating what they perceived as the effete frippery of those occupying the higher social strata.⁹⁹²

Pierre Bourdieu

An obvious difference between an adaptive preference and *amor fati* is that in the former the fox tries to get hold of the grapes in the here and now before forming the preference, whilst the naturalised tastes associated with *amor fati* are generational in nature. Bourdieu’s overall theory of distinction is also more expansive and not as clearcut as Elster’s concept of adaptive preferences. The habitus is at once a system of classification of practices and a ‘generative principle’ that works unconsciously to produce lifestyles and permanent bodily dispositions such as the style of one’s handwriting, or of comporting oneself, which Bourdieu contends are shared by all of the members of the same class.⁹⁹³ Fields comprise the social strata within which individuals struggle to acquire economic, cultural and symbolic capital. One of the arresting observations reported by Lukes is of Bourdieu’s description of the self-depreciation and self-denigration of Kabyle women, who perceived their genitals as deficient and disgusting. Bourdieu argues that to understand this situation one must move beyond a dichotomy

⁹⁸⁹ Elster, (1981, 223-224).

⁹⁹⁰ One wonders if Bourdieu may have influenced Elster’s development of the concept of adaptive preferences, given his mention of sour grapes at several points in his review of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* which was published a year earlier than Elster’s first piece on adaptive preferences (Elster, 1981).

⁹⁹¹ Bourdieu, (1988: 178 and plate on 383).

⁹⁹² Bourdieu, (1986: 383).

⁹⁹³ Bourdieu, (1986): 170-173).

that opposes coercion on the one hand to calculated submission on the other. Rather he argues that symbolic violence is at work in shaping the habitus, or the embodied dispositions that organize perceptions of the world below the level of consciousness, in a manner resistant to articulation and is not difficult to resist.

Lukes rejects Elster's assertion that willing compliance to domination simply cannot be brought about by something akin to three-dimensional power. He is more receptive to Bourdieu, arguing that his accounts "richly illustrate" aspects of the third dimension by accentuating how conventional class-based distinctions are disguised or rendered invisible by being naturalised and inscribed in bodily dispositions that are acquired during the earliest moments of life, in such a way that subjects misrecognize the sources and modes of the operation of power, none of which is intentionally given or achieved as the result of propaganda. (Lukes, 2021: 146).

Although he finds Bourdieu's theory fascinating, especially in relation to the interplay between biology and culture, Lukes is concerned that this area is not understood and in particular, "where, when and how does tacit, practical embodied knowledge set limits to 'discursive' learning and self-transformation?"⁹⁹⁴

Lukes (2021) also refers to Elster's argument that the recourse to 'unconscious strategies' such as those described by Bourdieu is suspect, particularly because it is insufficient to be told that the 'objective differentiation of conditions and dispositions' produces 'automatic, unconscious effects'.⁹⁹⁵ Yet, as discussed further in the conclusion to this chapter, while much has yet to be understood about these processes and whilst the research remains controversial, there is some evidence for the existence of such automatic and unconscious effects. However the major problem, If one is to rely on Bourdieu's account, is how is one to identify exactly when a person's interests are being dominated by others? Lukes quotes from Charles Taylor who asks, if adults tend to like the foods they ate as children, does this imply domination? Taylor answers his question by arguing that 'domination' would lose all of its meaning if it were allowed such wide latitude.⁹⁹⁶ How far is it permissible to insinuate that how one comports oneself, chews one's food, or enjoys particular foods is a sign of domination? In respect of this Lukes makes an important point which he later builds on regarding the development of criteria by which to judge this question which is that the subject is *less free, in Spinoza's phrase, "to live as their nature and judgment dictate"*.⁹⁹⁷

Lukes also disagrees with Bourdieu's criticism of consciousness-raising by Marxist and feminist scholars. In the latter's view this fails to account for inertia caused by the tenacious hold of dispositions inculcated through the habitus.⁹⁹⁸ As we have seen from Lukes' discussion of Nussbaum, he fundamentally disagrees with what he takes to be the

⁹⁹⁴ Lukes, (2021: 148).

⁹⁹⁵ Lukes, (2021: 246).

⁹⁹⁶ Lukes, (2021: 119).

⁹⁹⁷ Lukes, (2021, 71, 90). My italics.

⁹⁹⁸ Lukes, (2021: 148).

pessimism in Bourdieu's account. Instead, Lukes argues that writers on consciousness-raising helped him to develop ideas around a third dimension of power, which secures willing compliance to domination by the shaping beliefs and desires. Lukes thus aligns his argument not to Bourdieu, but to Buroway's reading of Gramsci, mentioning in a footnote the former's argument that the manufacturing of consent of workers in capitalism involves exploitation and misrecognition through mystification, which conceals the truth of their situation. Buroway differentiated his explanation from Gramsci's arguments for the conscious consent of subordinate groups, which he felt was overly optimistic, and from Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition, situated deep in the dispositions inculcated in the habitus and so resistant to change, as too pessimistic.⁹⁹⁹

Lukes on Foucault

While professing admiration for Foucault, Lukes cautions the need for an objective criterion against which to judge the operation of power and so he is critical of the argument made by Foucault, particularly in his early work, that one cannot step outside of power to find an external point of reference. Moreover, he asserts that Foucault obscures the distinction between the direct imposition of power and other influences that may be at work. Whilst describing Foucault's broad aim as similar to his own, in "seeking to uncover its least evident and least perceptible forms,"¹⁰⁰⁰

Lukes parts company with Foucault when it comes to specifying the mechanisms by which power achieves its ends. In particular, he objects to the claim by Foucault and his successors that power produces or 'makes up' subjects, which he finds 'wildly overstated'.¹⁰⁰¹ He dismisses arguments that power is omnipresent as disallowing any perch for critical purchase from which to determine or to judge between different ways of life, since each imposes its own "regime of truth". He finds much to admire in Flyvbjerg's (1998) detailed account of the hidden power relations at work in the establishment of a new bus terminal at Aalborg and in particular, on the role played by market and technical consultants in providing surveys and technical information that was used to try to create consensus.¹⁰⁰² However, although he acknowledges that Flyvbjerg has provided valuable insights into the operation of power, where he parts company with this and similar explanations, is when they describe power as all-pervasive and omnipresent such that there is no ledge outside of power that enables one to perch in order to gain critical purchase. For him the dire consequence is the impossibility of differentiating different ways of life, as each imposes its own regime of truth, the implication being that rationality is itself caught up in the web of power relations. Lukes links such arguments and the notion that the subject is 'made up' by power to Foucault's early work, which he argues

⁹⁹⁹ See note 1, Lukes (2021: 206).

¹⁰⁰⁰ Lukes, (2021: 95).

¹⁰⁰¹ Lukes, (2021: 95).

¹⁰⁰² Lukes, (2021: 108).

was overly influenced by Nietzsche, resulted in claims that were ‘wildly overstated and exaggerated’.¹⁰⁰³

Given such arguments, Lukes finds it unsurprising that many concluded that in his early work Foucault undermined the very idea of the autonomous moral agent and have thus been led to abandon the ideal of a society free from the negative effects of power, or that power can be based on the rational consent of its subjects.¹⁰⁰⁴ He does not cast the entirety of Foucault’s oeuvre in this light, suggesting that the latter’s works on governmentality and technologies of the self are more amenable to his explanation as they are at a distance from the Nietzschean influence that permeated Foucault’s earlier work on discipline and sexuality.

Lukes is more positive about the contribution made by feminists influenced by Foucault such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, discussing Bartky’s (1990) employment of disciplinary power to explain the patriarchal subjection of women made anxious by constant scrutinising and self-policing of their appearance, and referring to Bordo’s (2003) account of the normative practices by which the female body is trained in docility and obedience, instantiated by an interiorised inspecting gaze. Noting the paradox that the female body, which is trained to be docile and submissive can at the same time be experienced in terms of power and control, Bordo reiterates Foucault’s argument that where there is power there is also resistance; for example, the woman who develops muscles as the result of entering a weight-training programme feels more empowered at work, “resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious”.¹⁰⁰⁵ That said, Lukes is critical of Foucault’s exposition of disciplinary power as presenting a ‘one-sided and monolithic image of unidirectional control’, whereby humanitarian interventions are portrayed as obeying the same logic of control as prisons.¹⁰⁰⁶ This, he argues, was because Foucault did not investigate actual disciplinary practices but was rather concerned with the idealized form of their abstract design.

For Lukes, Foucault’s account of domination in *The History of Sexuality* while less reductive, remains highly abstract. He acknowledges the richness of Foucault’s explanation when arguing that power can operate through stimulation as well as repression, quoting the latter’s argument that, while the ‘revolt of the body’ that led to the sexually permissive society may induce a sense of freedom in the subject, this is illusory, because on a different register they are controlled by the economic exploitation of

¹⁰⁰³ Lukes, (2021: 96). I might add that in my understanding which differs slightly from Lukes, Foucault simply explains how, during the eighteenth century, identities such as the homosexual and the masturbating boy were constructed or “made up” by the emerging discourse of psychiatry, as subjects for concern in the context of the courts and in the home. However, just as in the discussion by Miller and Rose (1990) of how consumers were “made up” by marketing discourse in the 1950s, this abstract conception has little bearing on the experiences of the individuals nor of the extent to which they identified with, or disidentified or resisted such categorization.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Lukes, (2021, 97).

¹⁰⁰⁵ Lukes, (2021: 105).

¹⁰⁰⁶ Lukes, (2021: 98).

eroticization, “Get undressed – but be slim, be good-looking, tanned!”¹⁰⁰⁷ Similarly, the experience of feeling powerful and in control does not guarantee that this feeling is not itself the product of power relations on a different level, as in Bordo’s argument that the woman who works out at the gym to look more stylish can feel that she can assert herself more forcefully at work, such that, “resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious”.¹⁰⁰⁸

To summarize, Lukes is receptive to the conceptual question addressed by Foucault and appreciates the richness and depth of insight gained by empirical researchers influenced by Foucault’s work. However, he criticizes Foucault’s emphasis on structural relations, strategies and techniques rather than actual situations and real people. Likewise, whilst Foucault talks of resistance, he never offers a detailed account of this and indeed only the dominating agents feature in his accounts.¹⁰⁰⁹ Lukes suggests that the later work on governmentality strikes a more voluntaristic tone, as does the idea that the individual constitutes himself in an active fashion through practices of the self. As Lukes sees it by the end, Foucault is simply stating some of the basic tenets of sociology, although in a ‘distinctly Foucauldian way’,

Individuals are socialized: they are oriented to roles and practices that are culturally and socially given; they internalize these and may experience them as freely chosen; indeed, their freedom may, as Durkheim liked to say, be the fruit of regulation – the outcome of disciplines and controls. (Lukes, 2021: 102).

Lukes contends that the later work of Foucault, which boils down to the classic sociological explanation that individuals are socialized through being oriented to cultural roles that they may experience as freely chosen, signals the end of the “ultra-radicalism” apparent in earlier works. He acknowledges that Foucault achieves more than this by seeing these practices as forms of government beyond the state,¹⁰¹⁰

“These non-state authorities propose, suggest and impose these roles and practices upon individuals – that is, agents with two-way powers – who, in turn, must interpret their requirements and will sometimes resist and sometimes reject them. But all of this means that criteria will be needed to decide where their power amounts to domination and, in general, to distinguish between dominating and non- dominating power and dependency. And, not surprisingly, the ‘Final Foucault’ reaches for just such a distinction and so ends up travelling down the path sketched in the conceptual map above”.

Discussion

In this final section I consider the extent to which the theories described above might be of use in describing power in the context of marketing and consumption, starting with resistance. Discussion turns in the first instance to James Scott’s (1990) arguments for thin and thick mystification.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Foucault (1980: 57), in Lukes, (2021: 99).

¹⁰⁰⁸ Bordo (2003: 28) quoted in Lukes, (2021: 105).

¹⁰⁰⁹ Lukes, (2021: 100).

¹⁰¹⁰ Lukes, (2021, 102).

Overt Resistance to Marketing and Consumption

By comparison to James Scott (1990) whose arguments are based on forms of extreme subjection, a cursory review of the literature on consumer research suggest that there is little need for consumers to resort to covert forms of resistance. Indeed, consumer goods and their meanings are often used as markers of distinction between groups whose rivalries are played out on the keyboard of brands. Consumption practices have long been employed by youth subcultures to symbolically mark their territory against rivals and upset the status quo. In the UK the “Teddy Boys” and “Beatniks” of the 1950s were succeeded in the 1960s by Mods and Rockers, in the 1970s, by skinheads and punks (Hebdige, 1979), then in the 1980s by Hip Hop and New Romantics. And from the 1970s onwards LGBTQ activists used consumer goods to mark their distinctive style (Kates & Belk, 2001).

As discussed in chapter six, direct action often involves a consumer boycott directed against a high-profile corporation such as Barclays Bank, or McDonald’s, which remain on the hot list of current targets.¹⁰¹¹ Although high-profile organizations with a physical presence on the high street remain attractive, a number of boycotts have flared up against Amazon, Airbnb, Axa, Booking.com and many other online operations with purported links to Israel over the war in Gaza.¹⁰¹² Interestingly, no such action seems to have been directed towards the platforms that host them such as Whatsapp or Facebook.

Resistance by consumers has been defined by Peñaloza and Price (1993: 123) as, ‘the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination’. Formed in the 1990s, *Adbusters* mixed acts of appropriation together with symbolic acts of destruction. Kalle Lasn stated the message clearly in the pamphlet, *Smashing the Image Factory: A Complete Manual of Billboard Subversion and Destruction*, which offered tips on how to engage in ‘culture jamming’ by subverting the meaning of messages on billboards, or failing that, providing tips on how to efficiently chop a billboard down. Canadian concern about the media and mass culture can be traced back to Marshall McLuhan, and to later works by William Leiss and Naomi Klein, and is also manifest in popular culture in albums, “The Suburbs” (2010) and “Everything Now” (2017) by *Arcade Fire*, although as seems inevitable, purists have accused the band of ‘selling out’ to corporatism.

When Gail Bradbrook of *Extinction Rebellion* smashed the window of a Barclays bank branch, this could hardly be described as appropriative, although her action to publicize the, ‘revolving door between big banks, major oil companies and the government’ succeeded.¹⁰¹³ While Bradbrook was sentenced to pay a fine of £575, plus £678 in court

¹⁰¹¹ The *Ethical Consumer* maintains a record. <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/ethicalcampaigns/boycotts> Others include those targeted because of their links to Israel and also, KFC, Starbucks, Pizza-Hut, Coca-Cola, Disney, KFC, L’Oreal, Microsoft, Proctor & Gamble, Starbucks, Tesla, Twitter and Zara.

¹⁰¹² *Ethical Consumer*, (2025). *Boycotts list*. <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/ethicalcampaigns/boycotts>

¹⁰¹³ de la Mare, T. & D. Limbu, (2023). Extinction Rebellion co-founder fined for smashing Barclays window. *BBC News*, 6th January.

costs and victim surcharge, Aleksandra Skochilenko was sentenced to seven years in a Russian penal colony for her simple symbolic act of appropriation involving the replacement of supermarket price-tags with anti-war messages as a protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰¹⁴

Authors have sought to disentangle the various forms in which consumer resistance can occur. For instance, Fournier (1998) argued for a continuum from avoidance to hostile action. Although it can be unwise to label acts of 'voluntary simplicity' as resistance, the aim for a more sustainable lifestyle can involve the rejection, reduction or reuse of goods one disapproves of (Black & Cherrier, 2010). Researchers have also written of attempts to escape the anonymity of the market by sharing in the fantasy of rugged individualism with fellow "mountain-men,"¹⁰¹⁵ or the temporary and paradoxical form of anti-market community offered by attending the *Burning Man* festival.¹⁰¹⁶

Covert Resistance in Marketing and Consumption

Thin mystification (Scott, 1990) refers to covert acts of resistance that occur under the noses of the powerful by those subjected to their power. *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau (1984), is directed mainly at Foucault's ideas on the panoptic organisation and surveillance of space by arguing that the strategic intentions of those who organize such spaces are unravelled through the trajectories of those who traverse them. For instance, *One Day in My Life* by Bobby Sands (1983) details the myriad ways by which prisoners subverted the panoptic system of control that was employed in the H-Block prisons in Northern Ireland.

De Certeau argues that as customers and consumers when we shop, read magazines or watch television, we do not simply fit into the pre-formed slots constructed for us by marketers but appropriate them to serve our own ends in the manner of "La Perruque", the term he uses to describe the informal self-directed activity of employees who serve their own ends using the employer's resources or time which they disguise as legitimate. As consumers we engage in a 'tirelessly quiet' and 'invisible' form of production that is consumption, 'characterised by its ruses, poaching and fragmentation' (de Certeau, 1984, 31).

The most obvious form of physical appropriation is stealing, in relation to which some instantiations seem to rise and fall as fashions while others are long lasting. As examples of the former, public concern was raised in the UK in the 1980s over an 'epidemic' of "joyriding", caused by youths stealing cars and driving them fast for kicks, and by the appropriation of public spaces by skateboarders.¹⁰¹⁷ Shoplifting, which is currently

¹⁰¹⁴ Amnesty International (2023). Russia: Activist who replaced supermarket price tags with anti war messages jailed. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/russia-activist-who-replaced-supermarket-price-tags-anti-war-messages-jailed>. She was released in 2024 following a prisoner swap with Russians, including convicted assassins.

¹⁰¹⁵ Belk & Costa, (1998).

¹⁰¹⁶ Kozinets, (2002).

¹⁰¹⁷ Molloy, (2025).

described in similar terms to an epidemic spiralling out of control',¹⁰¹⁸ is described by many as a curse that raises the price of goods for consumers, while lauded by Fiske (1998), as a form of resistance against capitalism and all its works. Bauman (2017), who commented that disaffected youth preferred to destroy what they could not have, might well have concurred with Fiske, as one should not underestimate the feelings of resentment and anger experienced by those who are marginalized against a system that they perceive to work in the interests of the rich.

It is not hard to find other instances of what Scott refers to as “thin” resistance in marketing contexts. Walking down a city street many are wise to the activities of ‘chuggers’ and ‘suggers’ and will cross over in advance to avoid them. And in this context, while Scott writes of the covert resistance of the slave before the master, on city streets today one can witness the curious reversal that occurs when shoppers cross over to avoid the angst of having to engage with a homeless beggar.¹⁰¹⁹ Home-owners have developed ploys to rebuff the aggressive sales techniques employed by companies that offer to fix their roof or to install double-glazing or solar panels. Informants contributing to Heath et al. (2010), expressed cynicism about the daily grind of subjection such aggressive sales strategies and to the deceptive and manipulative point-of-sale promotions encountered in supermarkets. People have also developed defences to counter “confusion marketing” strategies designed by marketers of mobile technologies and lookalike products to defeat the customer’s ability to make an informed comparison.¹⁰²⁰ A number have also learned to shop around to avoid being locked into higher fees by insurance companies, utilities and broadband suppliers. However, judging from calls to consumer affairs programmes and from personal experience, a person can at times feel overwhelmed by the Sisyphean struggle involved in the demand for constant vigilance when reviewing and renewing utility and phone contracts, or wary of being scammed, trying in vain to speak to a human being.

Compared to the fuzziness of capitalism, marketing can be easier to pin down in the public imagination through being fixed to the stereotypical image of the advertiser as a magician or a huckster who dupes his mark by deflecting their attention like a three-card monte, or by creating a fictitious problem and then offering the product as a solution. Cynicism is often seen as a defensive psychological tool against the persuasive role of advertising by evincing constant suspicion toward advertising messages (Pollay, 1986), linked to wariness resulting from disappointment at unfulfilled promises (Heath et al.,

¹⁰¹⁸ Butler, Sarah, (2025). ‘Some steal to order’, On the frontline of UK shoplifting epidemic, *The Guardian*, 30th January.

¹⁰¹⁹ See for example, McIntosh & Erskine, (2000) and the blog post by Raghuraman, (2016) who writes, “I feel like some small part of me dies every time I ignore a homeless person”. <https://studyinsweden.se/blogs/2016/04/01/regarding-beggars-in-stockholm/>. Additionally, that begging is possibly one of the most ancient forms of marketing was evident on a visit to Rome near the Vatican where some true professionals were at work. What brought this home to me was when walking along West Nicholson Street in Edinburgh adjacent to the University I was passing a young man sitting by the side of the street, his eyes cast disconsolately downwards. A man passing to the inside of me bent down and exclaimed to him, “Ye need tae git yersel’ a dug!”

¹⁰²⁰ Wayne, Mitchell & Papavassiliou, (1999).

2010, Odou & de Pechpeyrou, 2011). Additionally, most people are by now be past-masters on how to minimize the constant bombardment of advertisements pushed by Youtube and other platforms when accessing “free” content. That said, there is little prospect of ‘resistance’ when one is trying to book tickets for a concert online and finds oneself subjected to “dynamic”, “surge”, “drip”, or “personalized” pricing. The individual in the role of consumer can be overwhelmed by choice and at the same time aware that this effectively boils down to having no choice.

We may avoid some products on account of their functional properties, such as, in the case of food; the use of GMO technology; or pesticides; or perhaps because of manner of its production, as in industrial farming; or where it is grown, as in soya produced from cleared rainforest; or because of the air-miles involved in its transport. Or we may disapprove of it because it offends our sense of taste; or symbolically, because of its country of origin. Contributors to the study of everyday shopping by Nixon and Gabriel (2016), reported sensations of being overwhelmed or polluted, and experiencing anxiety and disgust at the amount of plastic used in the UK to package goods sold in supermarkets. According to one participant, Nora, ‘I picked up about four things [in the January sales]. . . probably for three quarters of an hour, and I looked at these things and thought ‘what am I doing?’ and I actually hung them on a rail and walked out the shop!’. Here there was no conscious premeditation or any overt attempt to “resist”, but rather a response to being overwhelmed.

One line of research has focused more narrowly to ask why people avoid brands. Lee et al., (2009) argue that avoidance, where an individual deliberately chooses to keep away from or reject a brand is mainly due to brands that fail to deliver on their promises. Alternatively, a brand may summon a “negative constellation” of attributes that are identified with an image of one’s ‘undesired self” (Hogg & Bannister, 2001). One may for instance disapprove of the owner of the brand so that in the case of Elon Musk one may decide not to buy a Tesla in favour of another brand, although for obvious reasons, one is probably much less likely to abandon Whatsapp or Facebook even though one is not a fan of Mark Zuckerberg. There is an option to ‘resist’ these in a more positive way by subscribing to Solid, designed by the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners Lee, with the professed aim, ‘to return the web to its original vision of empowering individuals and enabling collaboration’.¹⁰²¹

Three-Dimensional Power in Marketing

In this final section I first revisit Lukes’ definition of three-dimensional power and then differentiate it more fully from James Scott’s (1990) concept of thick mystification. Next, I discuss Lukes’ suggestions as to how one might begin to investigate the third dimension of power and offer some illustrative examples in the context of marketing. I then expand on Lukes’ argument that real interests ought to be determined by adopting an external standpoint on one’s behaviour. This leads to discussion of Lukes’ advocacy of

¹⁰²¹ Solid is still in its infancy but if its potential is realised it will undermine the ability of FAANG to appropriate and monetise user data. Solid is described as ,”being a bit like carrying all your data in a rucksack (backpack) with lots of pockets. To access the data, different apps can only open the pocket you allow them to open, rather than taking the whole rucksack”. <https://solidproject.org/about>

consciousness-raising as offering potential hope for those trapped by in the third dimension of power as a means to transcend their situation, in respect of which I briefly discuss how Lukes' contrasts his activist stance from the quietism he detects in Bourdieu. The chapter then concludes with a tentative discussion of power in the marketing academy. To begin with, it helps to restate Lukes' definition of three-dimensional power where,

he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?¹⁰²²

John Gaventa who synthesised the three dimensions of power into the Powercube puts this similarly when arguing that, 'power, in its more insidious forms, may be internalised in terms of one's values self-esteem and identities, such that, 'voices in visible places are but echoes of what the power holders who shaped those places want to hear.'¹⁰²³

Determining Three Dimensional Power

Lukes develops a number of criteria by which to determine whether or not a particular instance is explicable by the third dimension of power; does it extend beyond the scope of first and second level explanations?; what are the effects on the interests of those involved?; what are the mechanisms by which it achieves its aims?¹⁰²⁴ For instance, he argues that Zuboff's (2019), concept of instrumentarian power largely meets the first criterion, as it describes an opaque form of control based on background processing of huge amounts of information provided by unwitting users. Lukes demurs however, when stating that while Zuboff takes claims about the effectiveness of instrumentarian power at face value, more information is needed concerning the effectiveness of behaviour modification on the wider population. However overall he agrees that this form of power points to a real tendency at work in the world.¹⁰²⁵

The determination of the question of interests seems relatively straightforward, given that the interests of the individuals whose data is fed into algorithms are potentially harmed while those of the surveillance capitalists are enhanced, although Lukes does not discuss the counterfactual, that users of social media individuals might have behaved differently had they been made aware of their situation.¹⁰²⁶ Lukes suggests that Zuboff's account could have been broadened beyond discussion of the effects of power on individuals who are no longer sovereign consumers, by considering the use of instrumentarian power in situations such as the rationing access to credit and health insurance, identifying immigrants for deportation, or most insidiously, its reach into electoral manipulation. Finally, he queries some the mechanisms identified by Zuboff to explain how

¹⁰²² Lukes, (2021, 32).

¹⁰²³ Gaventa, (2006, 29).

¹⁰²⁴ Lukes, (2021, 69). He argues that additionally, one should seek to falsify one's explanation.

¹⁰²⁵ Lukes, (2021, 178).

¹⁰²⁶ Lukes, (2021, 178).

instrumentarian power operates and suggests some potential alternatives. For instance, where Zuboff describes this as a form of dispossession of the user, Lukes contends that the process can better be described as a form of perverse gift relation or “Maussian bargain” where the consumer is tied in through the offer of a “free” service. He also argues that the frequent use of distraction has a major effect in blunting higher-order capacities to reason and evaluate.¹⁰²⁷

Distinguishing Three Dimensional Power from Thick Mystification

While the above rather crude summary is intended to illustrate the bare bones of Lukes’ approach, it is important to differentiate three dimensional power from Scott’s (1990) idea of “thick mystification”, as each describes the situation where the dominated come actively to believe in the values that explain their subordination. While Scott dismisses thick mystification as a fantasy held by middle-class intellectuals, Lukes holds onto this idea, not in the sense of a suffocating all-encompassing uniformity of consciousness that is impervious to change, but as contextual, contingent and open to change through consciousness-raising. Thus,

Power’s third dimension is always focused on particular domains of experience and is never, except in fictional dystopias, more than partially effective. It would be simplistic to suppose that ‘willing’ and ‘unwilling’ compliance to domination are mutually exclusive: one can consent to power and resent the mode of its exercise.¹⁰²⁸

As an example of ‘thick mystification’ Jeff Murray (2002) describes Anna from the rural setting of Mountain Home, Arkansas, as an example of the willing engagement of an individual who succumbs to the false promises of advertising imagery. Murray describes Anna as seeking to compensate for the stigma of inequality arising from her origin in this rural backwater by modelling her appearance on, ‘a classy and sophisticated look’ based on her avid consumption of stylish images from fashion magazines. Murray’s argument, that the simulated identities constructed by the media are based on “false promises” is strikingly similar to that made by Horkheimer and Adorno who describe the situation of a lowly typist in the 1930s who was similarly lured by cinematic portrayals of “rags to riches success” such that, “ideology conceals itself in the calculation of probabilities. Not everyone will be so lucky” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2004: 25).

Consider also the unfortunate experience of dislocation and disorientation experienced as a consequence of their identification with western consumption lifestyles by the Turkish women described by Üstüner and Holt (2007; 2010). The young women they describe had been displaced with their families from rural villages to dwell in squatter camps in the cityscape. In the urban setting they were drawn to emulate the flashy “Baltici” lifestyle they observed around them and began to disparage the traditional skills of knitting and spinning practiced by their mothers. They then describe the failure of these young women to achieve their dream of the Baltici lifestyle as a thwarted or failed identity project, because they did not possess the social, economic or cultural capital necessary to realise their aspiration. In a later study, Üstüner and Holt (2010) observed the disorientation

¹⁰²⁷ Lukes, (2021, 179).

¹⁰²⁸ Lukes, (2021, 155).

experienced of Turkish women possessing high cultural capital who had vainly sought to accommodate to Western cultural codes, which the authors liken to learning a cryptic and complex foreign language. Despite their best effort, western style remained as a borrowed culture, with the women feeling like posers who tried to emulate others.

Real Interests

In respect to the third dimension of power, further consideration of the situation of Anna from Mountain Home (Murray, 2002) and of the women described by Üstüner and Holt (2007, 2010) necessarily involves discussion of their real interests, because power is present, *wherever it furthers, or does not harm, the interests of the powerful and bears negatively upon the interests of those subject to it.*¹⁰²⁹ Lukes would thus have gone further than Murray (op. cit.) to determine whether or not Anna might be subject to domination on the basis that her real interests had been harmed; specifically, one might ask whether Anna is dominated by her identification with the images she so avidly consumes? For Lukes, the answer to such questions cannot simply be read off but requires consideration of the particular circumstances in which that a person finds themselves and why they have chosen to engage in this behaviour.

Referring to those who like Anna, aim for an image of sophistication, but at the considerable risks involved in undergoing plastic surgery, Lukes argues that this decision can sometimes be a ‘clear-eyed’ and ‘highly rational’ strategy, quoting Susan Bordo, that people know the routes to success in today’s dog-eat-dog world, “and they are not dopes to pursue them’. This reminds me of the documentary *Body Snippers*, made back in the 1990s which I used as a vehicle for teaching, that showcases four individuals of different ethnicities who each evince the desire for a “European nose” (I must admit to being baffled by the very idea that anything like a “European nose” existed). At one point Prince Valentino, a stripper and part-time model with rippling muscles, a six-pack and a chiselled face, who looks the very model of bodily perfection exclaims when quizzed, “I’m a man and I’m free to be who I want to be!” Deeply enamoured of his appearance, the Prince tells the camera that he decided to follow through on this rather drastic action against the vociferous objections of family and friends, for purely commercial reasons.

Given that Prince Valentino seemed to have a “clear-eyed” understanding of the risks and rewards of undergoing surgery, then following Lukes’ argument, the question of whether or not his decision was subject to domination requires consideration of the interests involved. Although when aggregated to many thousands, Prince’s decision progressively accommodates society to the “look” demanded by the marketplace, his decision most immediately benefitted the plastic surgeon and who knows, albeit at the risk to his health, may have gained the Prince more modelling contracts! We might similarly learn from Anna that her cultivation of a “sophisticated look’ from magazines was calculated as a strategic act with the ultimate aim to gain her the symbolic capital required for entry into the highly competitive job marketplace; who knows!.

While the two studies of Turkish women by Üstüner and Holt (2007; 2020) were informed by Bourdieu, the situation of the women they describe might also be understood as

¹⁰²⁹ Lukes, (2021, 91). Italics are mine

examples of the operation of the third dimension of power, as the women involved have clearly experienced problems from their identification with western ideals. While the authors discuss these cases in relation to questions of identity and status, from Lukes' (2021) perspective, the key question to be determined should be based on a consideration of their real interests. Consequently one would need to learn more of their situation and if, and if so how, their interests were affected before reaching a conclusion.

An External Standpoint

I should mention that the determination of real interests did not feature in the first edition of PRV (Lukes, 1974), so it is likely that these were subsequently introduced to defend Lukes's argument against accusations of moral relativism. Discussing Lukes (1974), Stewart Clegg (1989), considered whether the introduction of an external observer who can determine real interests objectively from the outside might solve the problem, but concluded that it would not, because, "(o)ne would thus be damned by others who did not share that observer's value preferences (Clegg, 1989, 117)".

It is worth exploring the question of the external observer further, for Clegg's wariness is understandable as it points to a conundrum at the heart of arguments for positive liberty, which presume a beneficent authority. For instance, the "choice architecture" devised by self-described 'libertarian paternalists' Thaler and Sunstein (2003), is presumed to operate under the auspices of 'good governance', underpinned by liberal-democratic values, whose aim is to coax individuals to engage in behaviour that is conducive to their "real" interest, as envisaged by experts. As an illustration, they offer the everyday example of a café manager who prominently displays a bowl of fruit in front of the pudding in the display as a means to "nudge" customers to eat healthier food.

Zuboff (2019) devotes considerable space to discussing the very different idea of freedom to civic republicanism espoused by the behaviourist B.F. Skinner, whose theory informs "nudge" economics. For Skinner, human behaviour is eminently malleable and open to change through "tuning", involving manipulation of subtle subliminal cues and "herding", by controlling cues in the immediate context. Skinner believed that humans are organisms for whom the idea of freedom is an illusion that is similar to the accidents that occur in physics, operating as a defence mechanism against ignorance that human behaviour is determined by environmental contingencies. In this understanding, "our ignorance of precisely how it does so is the void we fill with the fantasy of freedom".

Compared to the beneficent application of positive freedom by those of a civic republican disposition such as Thaler and Sunstein (op. cit.), in the illiberal hands of the overlords of FAANG, despite their frequently strident calls for the protection of freedom of speech, (which equates freedom with freedom to lie, mislead and abuse with impunity), tuning and herding are the mechanisms utilised in social media algorithms designed to modify and drive behaviour purely for the purpose of maximising attention in order to maximise their profit.

From the above, there is no need to resort to "social credit" systems that operate in some autocracies to show that mechanisms aimed to benefit the consumer might equally work in the opposite direction. Additionally, as argued by Barry Hindess, the judgement of the

observer might itself be flawed as they may be prone to wishful thinking. Hindess refers to the context of observers from the left he calls the “enlightened few”, who imputed ‘real interests’ to the ‘working-classes’, who then had to develop further explanations to account for what was missing in their explanation when workers failed to rise up and cast off their chains,

“(w)hat is missing here is enlightenment, and it is said to be missing because of rule by consent, bourgeois hegemony, three-dimensional power”.¹⁰³⁰

Consciousness-Raising

The above raises the question as to how Lukes deals with the problem of the external identification of interests? Given that he is, “all too familiar from the history of communism: to call those dictates ‘objective’ or ‘real interests’ which are imputed, from the outside, by observers or activists”¹⁰³¹, his answer is that this requires an external standpoint.¹⁰³² How might one develop an external standpoint in the absence of an external observer? Although he does not mention this, it seems reasonable to surmise that by an external standpoint, Lukes is referring to the impartial spectator described by Adam Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This standpoint does not necessitate the presence of another person, but rather points to the reflexive ability to, “identify ourselves with the ideal man within the breast, and look at our own conduct with the severe eyes of the most impartial spectator ...and it is always from that spectator, from whom we can expect the least sympathy and indulgence, that we are likely to learn the most complete lesson of self-control”.¹⁰³³ This squares with Lukes’ references to Spinoza’s argument that the individual who is most free (possessed of his own right), is the one with the greatest strength of mind.

Following Burns’ injunction, ‘to see ourselves as others see us’, then from Lukes (2021) a first step in responding to one’s behaviour being ‘tuned’ or ‘herded’ and driven by social media algorithms to fill the coffers of the “Tech Bros.” is to become reflexively aware of one’s situation.

The “Reflexively Defiant” Consumer

The idea that individuals in market societies are mystified and need to be emancipated is argued for by Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Ozanne and Murray (1995). The case of Anna from Mountain Home was discussed earlier and while Murray (2002) does not tell the reader precisely *how* Anna might become a “reflexively defiant” consumer, he hints that beneath the lure of simulated identity lies the possibility of an authentic existence. In his early years Marx might have argued that Anna possess a unique ‘species being’ and can find meaning, self-recognition, purpose and self-realization in the objects she freely

¹⁰³⁰ Hindess, (1982, 508).

¹⁰³¹ Lukes, (2021, 127).

¹⁰³² Lukes, (2021, 151).

¹⁰³³ Quotes are from Smith, A., (2009). The influences and authority of conscience, in, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Amartya Sen (intro.), Ryan Patrick Hanley (ed.) chapter three:, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

produces, an authentic being that now seems lost, as she has become alienated from her own production by engaging in the fruitless sense for meaning and self-worth in the commodity marketplace. Lukes too is concerned with questions of authenticity and what is 'truly human', which from Spinoza and Marx, he ultimately ties down to the human capacity for rationality. In relation to power, the key issue for Lukes is specifically when a person's rationality is blunted by domination so that they fail to see that which is clear and obvious to others.

Holt (2002) selected two individual cases, comprising Paul and Don respectively, such that Paul exemplified Murray and Ozanne's (1991) reflexively defiant consumer, while Don fitted that of the 'liberatory postmodern' consumer described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Paul is described as an exemplar of the reflexively defiant consumer who ekes out a cavelike spartan existence in a basement apartment and is constantly on the alert to defend against marketing propaganda by subjecting every prospective purchase to intense scrutiny in seeking to avoid being duped. Paul focuses exclusively on functional utility at the expense of aesthetics, acting as a "shopping engineer" whose calculative style comes close to that of the mythical homo economicus, even when paying \$300 for a pair of solid brass lamps, which he seeks to justify on the ground of their utility. Ultimately, as Holt explains it, Paul engages in a, 'highly reflexive and focused defense against the market's attempts to trick him also draws him to participate in the market, creating for him a meta-identity of a sovereign consumer'.¹⁰³⁴ Don on the other hand can hardly be described as abstemious given that he owns one hundred kites, several bikes and assorted hubs, subscribes to, 'every bike magazine he can find', and owns more than one hundred western shirts. Holt describes Don as a classic bricoleur who is always on the lookout for innovations but appropriates what the market dictates.

Holt detects a paradox in the consumption styles of these men who on the one hand, are alert to the wiles of marketers, but who nonetheless centre their identity-work in relation to the marketplace rather than on family, friends, religion, or work. Indeed, Paul is described by Holt as an uber consumer for whom the market forms the locus of his life, whilst Don, who works creatively to make every commodity his own, is constantly seduced by market offerings. Consequently, although both men resist the cultural authority of marketing, neither has been emancipated from the market.¹⁰³⁵

What difference might it make were one to apply Lukes' criterion of real interests to the situations of Paul and Don? While it is the case that each is extensively involved in the marketplace, as described by Holt (2002), there is insufficient information provided to identify any interest in Paul other than a concern for utility and durability. Don on the other hand is extensively involved in the marketplace, although many of his purchases are employed productively as means for self-cultivation and development through his involvement in dancing and cycling (Csikzentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Looked at in this way is it either here nor there that these men are not entirely emancipated from the market, for who is in this day and age? In any event 'the market' and 'capitalism' are

¹⁰³⁴ Holt, (2002, 76).

¹⁰³⁵ Holt, (2002, 79).

rather fuzzy and inchoate entities against which to be 'reflexively defiant', and it seems that in Paul's case, his wariness is not so much directed against 'the market', as directed against the claims made by big brand advertisers. Seen in this way, then perhaps Paul's 'reflexive defiance' is motivated by a pervasive fear that seems to be particularly ingrained in the consciousness of the USA, where hostility is directed not so much against the market, but rather at the size and remoteness of the Federal state or "big government", (generally, but not exclusively expressed by the political right) and of "big business" (generally by those on the left), which in the case of the latter can easily be mistaken for a revolt against capitalism.¹⁰³⁶

Other than "reflexively defiant" consumers are those who engage in self-cultivation by developing the capability to look after their own needs, fending for themselves where possible by growing some of their own vegetables, learning to cook, or 'make do and mend', who are also mindful of opportunities that arise to reduce their consumption. Gabriel and Lang (2015) describe consuming less as the 'final frontier' of the consumer rebel, given that the image of the frugal consumer is still haunted by the negative stereotype of the hippy who knits his own muesli.¹⁰³⁷ These might be regarded as reasonable actions to take, not only as practical responses to the threat posed by global heating, but also in the face of the looming crisis faced by 'developed' countries whose populations approach the dystopian ideal depicted in *Wall-E*, given that 12% of the population in the USA and 8.6% of the UK population are now estimated to suffer from diabetes which is at an all-time high in each country, and additionally, that Artificial Intelligence which is sold as liberatory, threatens to remove the capability for one to think or to write for oneself.

Reflexive Defiance in Andhra Pradesh

Lukes (2021) cites Martha Nussbaum's (2000) account of how their engagement in consciousness-raising groups enabled women who dwelled in small communities in Andhra Pradesh, India to gain a modicum of reflexive defiance. Nussbaum argues for a positive understanding of liberty which focuses on the need to develop of capabilities such as literacy and numeracy as real freedoms which equip a person with the means to achieve their goals by enabling them to acquire functionings, such as the ability to read and write and do arithmetic. From her visit to Andhra Pradesh, Nussbaum describes how the initially reluctant engagement of women in consciousness-raising groups afforded them a sense of agency and voice with local authorities that gained them the respect of their husbands and of the wider community. By such means argues Nussbaum, these women harnessed reflexive awareness, from which to view their situation with a degree of detachment. One example she provides of her visit to a village that had previously lacked a clean water supply is particularly striking,

¹⁰³⁶ This observation was prompted by my reading Kozinets (2002) research that was contemporaneous with Holt (2002) many of which expressed dislike and distrust of bigness and also by reading those on the right such as Murray Rothbard and H.L. Mencken who display a visceral hatred of big government and big corporations, as do member of "New Right" youth movements today.

¹⁰³⁷ Gabriel & Lang, (2015, 162)

Before the arrival of a government consciousness-raising program, these women apparently had no feeling of anger or protest about their physical situation. They knew no other way. They did not consider their conditions unhealthful or unsanitary, and they did not consider themselves to be malnourished. Now their level of discontent has gone way up: they protest to the local government, asking for clean water, for electricity, for a health visitor. They protect their food supplies from flies, they wash their bodies more often (Nussbaum, 2000, 113).

In the above case the counterfactual seems indisputable, as can be readily understood if a person in such a situation were to become conscious of what by any other standard was the dire condition of their life situation. Once emaciated, undernourished, women, who clung to the barest possible human existence are later described as transformed through consciousness-raising into vociferous and demanding consumers possessed, in Spinoza's term, "of their own right".

Project Shakti: A hard road?

It is fortuitous that we may be able to follow the fortunes of some of these women from Andhra Pradesh, given that they may well have joined Project Shakti, the joint venture formed in 2000 between Hindustan Unilever and the state government, which piggy-backed onto the existing network of women's development groups described by Nussbaum, (2000).¹⁰³⁸ This initiative was described by HUL as, "not a corporate social responsibility programme (but) a business initiative with social benefits"¹⁰³⁹, with the aim to enable women in poor rural communities in Andhra Pradesh to become entrepreneurs. The project set the ambitious goal to recruit one-hundred-thousand Shakti Amma (Empowerment Mothers) covering five-hundred-thousand villages, to reach six hundred million consumers by 2021. Each woman was asked to invest ten thousand rupees to buy stock from HUL, from which they could expect to make a profit of between nine and ten percent.

Although this network marketing initiative was initially targeted solely to housewives and teachers, it was objected to by shopkeepers, who were eventually allowed to join. Many of the Ammas subsequently reported that their ability to make money increased their self-confidence and the scheme had led to them being better respected in their local communities, for instance, through being addressed by their first name as opposed to their last, which identifies their caste. On the other hand, Thekuddan (2010) asserts that by 2006, many Shakti Ammas could not make a profit as the job demanded from two to eight hours a day and involved the collective effort of the entire household, such that it was only if one was already a shopkeeper that profitability was assured. Additionally, although the business was in the name of the woman, Thekuddan reports that many did not experience the projected freedom of choice and control over their lives as, given "communal expectations" on her ability to move freely outside the home, her husband or sons had assumed the role of taking orders and making deliveries or actually ran the business.

¹⁰³⁸ Neath & Sharma, (2008, 14). The Shakti Revolution: How the world's largest home-to-home operation is changing lives and stimulating economic activity in rural India. *World Bank Institute*, June.

¹⁰³⁹ Ibid., 15.

Thekuddan (2010) concludes that while HUL benefitted from the programme as it was able to establish itself in a previously untapped market, earning an estimated thousand million rupees in 2006, many of the Ammas experienced problems such as lack of credit and unsold stock and when they looked to the government for support, it drew back from involvement in the scheme. Given more support from government and the involvement from NGOs, she feels that the scheme might have been more successful,

Rather the result was making vulnerable salesgirls unable to empower themselves in the absence of state mediation and support from civil society.¹⁰⁴⁰

This quote seems rather downbeat given Thekuddan also mentioned how many of the women involved in the project had felt that they were better respected as a consequence of their involvement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report authored by executives from Hindustan Unilever in 2008 struck a very different tone, contending that Project Shakti was a great success, as by 2007, forty-six thousand Shaktis had been recruited covering one-hundred thousand villages in fifteen states, reaching three million rural households. A subsequent report by market research firm Kantar (2024) found that by the end of 2021, the number had trebled to one hundred and sixty five thousand Shaktis in eighteen states¹⁰⁴¹, which although a significant increase, did not come close to achieving the initial aim of the programme.

Discussion

Project Shakti raises difficult questions in relation to consciousness-raising and “real interests”. It is a classic neoliberal enterprise on an unprecedented scale which illustrates the retreat of the state and in its aim to re-direct individuals from their traditional roles to become entrepreneurs and consumers of commodities. It also foregrounds the role of the consumer in the marketplace as the primary agent of social action and change. At a general level this raises the question of the inculcation of neoliberal ideology and practice into the lives of the inhabitants of rural India that aims to transform them into entrepreneurs and consumers of commodities; is this initiative like introducing a spider to catch a fly? More specifically, the dominance of one corporation, HUL, raises questions about influence and lack of choice. In relation to influence, the “Shakti Vani” (voice) initiative was another aspect of the programme that involved training local women to give talks on hygiene, disease prevention and prenatal care. While the aim of this programme seems laudable, given that Thekuddan (2010) mentions that one of the most popular purchases from Shakti Ammas was *Fair and Lovely* skin lightening cream, one wonders if these talks provided opportunities for promotions of other HUL products? Most striking is that in light of Nussbaum’s (2000) account, which highlights the role played by consciousness-raising in enabling these women to recognise their subjection to domination, if we are to take Thekuddan’s (2010) conclusion at face value, then this is the beginning of what for many will prove to be a long and hard road to follow.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Thekuddan, (2010, 92)

¹⁰⁴¹ Kantar Republic, (2024). *Summary on social and economic impact of Project Shakti, 2023-2024*. <https://www.hul.co.in/files/21d907e1-bff6-44c7-858b-7be7e7e749b4/project-shakti.pdf>

Beyond Consciousness? Lukes vs. Bourdieu

The situation of the Amma's can be read in different ways; for instance, as a cautionary tale of a largely failed attempt by vulnerable young women in seeking to move from the frying pan of patriarchal power to the fire of precarious capitalism; or more positively, as an uncertain step by them towards the achievement of freedom and respect that had hitherto been denied them. Given that consciousness plays a central role in Nussbaum's (2000) account and in Lukes' theory of power, it is no surprise to learn that Lukes strongly contests Bourdieu's dismissal of consciousness-raising. While 'misrecognition' for Bourdieu is similar to Marxian ideas of 'false consciousness' he argues that it works at a deeper level which can transcend any intent at conscious manipulation by one group or another.¹⁰⁴² Lukes argues that Bourdieu's theory of the habitus appears to, "express a generalized view of 'internalization' beyond reflexive critique", thus ignores the individual's capacity for change.¹⁰⁴³ The following case enables discussion of this important question in the context of the choice by parents of a school for their children.

The conundrum faced by James (2015) was, given the importance of success in primary and secondary education to success in later life, why on earth would a small group of white middle-class parents decide to go 'against the grain' by deliberately choosing to send their children to under-performing state schools?

James describes typical middle-class parents as 'ideal consumers', who base their choice of school on extensive research based on access to school rankings and inspection reports, leading many to seek to game the system by moving house well in advance, some even choosing to rent another property in the school catchment area, or by attending church for a time in order to gain acceptance to a high-ranking school. In the context of such rampant competition, the decision by those who go "against the grain" by enrolling their child into a below par state school can seem inexplicable. The researchers found that the parents they interviewed often disputed the idea of one-dimensional school rankings according to which one can evaluate a school in the same way as a washing machine. Instead, they saw their choice of a state school as a radical means to broaden the habitus of their progeny. However, James argues from a Bourdieusean perspective, that there was much more to their decision, as misrecognition was involved, despite the professed attempt of these parents to act ethically.

In interviews, these middle-class parents constantly referred to the "brightness" of their children and the "brightness and ambition" of some ethnic children, whilst disparaging that of local working-class children. Indeed, some were so *confident* (his italics) of the brightness of their children that this justified their risky decision. James argues that comments made by some that children will 'rise to their natural place' are indicative of a form of misrecognition, where some dispositions are interpreted as natural rather than as socially maintained. He also describes the 'mutual affinity' that developed between middle-class parents who were often members of school Boards, and head teachers.

¹⁰⁴² Gaventa (2003, 6),

¹⁰⁴³ Lukes, (2021, 148).

Their children, who tended to be in the top learning set, were relatively isolated, making few friends with their working-class counterparts. James describes the parents as often quite pushy, demanding a high level of engagement from teachers, which they often received, and that they benefited from extra public resources devoted to these generally underperforming schools such as the “Gifted and Talented” scheme.

James reflects that that it would be mistaken to see these middle-class parents’ rejection of school “league tables’ as enlightened. As the parents saw it, their children’s rise to the top set was ‘naturally’ explicable by differences between them and their working-class counterparts in motivation and intelligence. As James explains it from a Bourdieusian perspective, it would take a lot to ‘even disturb the intricate and convoluted processes by which...social difference is converted through educational action.’ Class-based inequality was not “cognised” but rather was mis-recognized as based on the assumed natural intelligence of middle-class children as set against their working-class peers who feel inferior at expressing themselves and are lacking in vocabulary and self-confidence.

Discussion

James (2015) feels no need to complicate his explanation by including the potentially problematic consideration of real interests, and I might add that neither do social movement researchers such as McAdam et al. (2001). However, for Lukes, real interests are important, as they help one to distinguish what really matters from what is inconclusive or incidental. Looking at the above case from Lukes’ perspective, one ought first determine if the real interests of the parties concerned have affected by power and if so, how this situation might be mitigated? This raises the difficulty if one takes Lukes at face value, that recognition of real interests should arise from the consciousness-raising of those involved and not from attributions made by an outside observer. John Gaventa also argues the need to be very careful of imputing real interests, for example by imputing that B would want X if only they were made aware of their real interest. For him the imputation of a real interest should be used as a methodological tool to discover whether or not existing power relations have excluded active and conscious choice by B about such interests.¹⁰⁴⁴ Below, if only for illustrative purposes, I try to follow Lukes’ reasoning concerning real interests in relation to the above case developed from James, (2015).

Given Lukes’ argument that domination exists, *wherever it furthers, or does not harm, the interests of the powerful and bears negatively upon the interests of those subject to it*¹⁰⁴⁵, then how might this apply to this case? The decision by middle-class parents to send their children to a state school seems to fulfil the first clause, in that their interests were not harmed, and indeed may have been furthered by their decision. At one level these parents are described as acting reflexively and responsibly against the dictates of the prevailing market-driven orientation of their peers in a manner that might be considered noble and even sacrificial, or irresponsible, were it not for the fact that their children prospered and indeed excelled in this setting. At another level, by assuming that their children are naturally gifted and thus by setting aside factors associated with their class

¹⁰⁴⁴ Gaventa, (2006, 276-277).

¹⁰⁴⁵ Lukes, (2021, 91), my italics.

privilege, one might argue that their reasoning has been blunted, not so much by an external power from above, but internally, through the operation of self-serving biases. On the other hand, James does not enquire whether or not the behaviour of these middle-class parents has had a negative effect on the interests of pupils from Asian backgrounds or on the prospects of pupils from the indigenous working-class (Lukes, 2021, 91). He might have been able to do so had he compared the performance of pupils at this school with that of a similar sized school whose pupils were drawn purely from the ‘native’ population.

From Lukes’ perspective, James’ “Bourdieuisean” conclusion might be thought rather pessimistic, as one might argue that by the very fact of raising this previously hidden issue, the research findings might themselves have provided material for the middle-class parents involved to engage in consciousness-raising and through a process of reflection to become aware of the mechanisms of power that operated to ensure a favourable outcome for their children. Against this prospect is that the specific choice of these parents to send their children to a state school involved considerable investment of resources into a particular identity, as being more socially aware and principled than their peers, so that any attempt to problematise their choice of school would put this identity into question and increase dissonance. If this were the case it is likely that any attempt to raise their consciousness would be met with a negative response involving attempts to neutralise the claims made in the research report. On the other hand one does not need to resort to the classic but dated study by Willis (1977) to understand that working class children may not be inclined to have their consciousness raised. That this is indeed an intricate problem is apparent in the recognition by policymakers of an ‘attainment gap’ in schooling in the UK that is present at every level and which has grown wider, especially since the pandemic. Despite this it seems that there have been small signs of improvement as a consequence of initiatives such as the “Sure Start” programme, launched in 1998 and the more recent introduction of free school meals, Family Hubs and the Start for Life programme.¹⁰⁴⁶

Real Interests and the Law

One might argue from the above that it is possible to identify real interests as the basis to inform government policies where they are framed as rights and are inscribed into law. For instance, revisiting the case of the employment of child labourers in Bangladesh discussed in chapter six, was framed as a choice between two welfare interests, sustenance or education? While it would be a gross over-simplification to describe the positions adopted by opposing groups on these as hard and fast, one side asserted the pre-eminent need for education as providing the only lasting means for exploited children to escape an otherwise relentless cycle of deprivation and a life of grinding poverty. On the other side, it was argued that the right to basic sustenance and the necessities obtained through being permitted to work is of even more importance for these children.

As mentioned in chapter six, Hertel (2006) describes how, in the case of children working in the RMG sector in Bangladesh, the determination of their real interests ultimately rested

¹⁰⁴⁶ UK Parliament, (2024). *Education: inequalities and attainment gaps*, 11th November.

on interpretations of international law codified by ILO Convention No. 138. Those on one side of the argument cited Article 2 of the Convention which sets a minimum age for employment which should not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling. On the other side, an activist cited Article 7, which concedes that in special conditions of underdevelopment, children between the ages of 12-14 may be permitted to perform “light work” so long as they can avail themselves of schooling opportunities. It was this second interpretation based on Article 7 that formed the basis for the first Memorandum of Understanding.

The question thus raised as to who is to decide, points to a central concern about the potential for harm involved by subscribing to a view of positive freedom.

At the other end of the spectrum from international law is the rather unusual situation that arose when a number of British juries acquitted defendants who had been accused of acts of criminal damage, and who had freely admitted this. The rationale employed by the defence was based on the ground that the perpetrators had acted in the real interests of those whose property they damaged by seeking to prevent an even greater crime from being committed. In a case involving *Extinction Rebellion*, the defence used by protestors who smashed expensive plate glass windows of JP Morgan bank to draw attention to the climate crisis was based on ‘belief in consent’. Essentially the defence rested on the argument that the perpetrators had acted in the real interests of the property owner who would have condoned the damage caused to their building and indeed would have done the same damage themselves if they had been aware of their real interests.¹⁰⁴⁷

Real Interests in Marketing

It is notable that Philip Kotler (1972) once argued against the short term satisfaction of preferences and for business to focus instead on the satisfaction of long-term interests of the consumer; for instance, that firms should focus on thinking of ways of reformulating products such as tobacco, which provides pleasure and immediate satisfaction but is also highly addictive and harmful to the consumers’ long-run interests.¹⁰⁴⁸ In retrospect, his argument seems rather naïve and unrealistic, given how even before his paper was published, executives in entire industries had circled their wagons against any attempt to limit their ability to market their harmful products.

Fifty years after Kotler published his paper on the societal concept, marketing luminary Shelby Hunt complained that marketers continued to avoid fundamental issues pertaining to the wellbeing of society, such as, ‘entrenched poverty, income inequality, food and health insecurity, pollution, climate change and environmental degradation.’¹⁰⁴⁹ Fellow luminary George Day added his voice to Hunt’s plea, that he is troubled by the hostile climate against social initiatives now evident in the era of Trump-47, as corporations do a

¹⁰⁴⁷ Extinction Rebellion, (2026). *In case of medical emergency break glass*, 19th February. See also various newspaper articles.

¹⁰⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that at the time RJ Reynolds in the USA and Imperial Tobacco and ICI were investigating means to produce less harmful products.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Hunt et al., (2022, 20).

reverse ferret from previous expressions of their firm commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programmes.¹⁰⁵⁰ Fitchett et al (2015) identified a similar issue in their critique of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) for its narrow neoliberal focus on the individual and for its lack of attention to the wider political and social context of consumption.

Real Interests and Inequality

Looking back to Jeff Murray's discussion of Anna from Mountain Home, his principal concern about Anna and those like her concerns her unequal status which leaves her vulnerable and open to the 'desperate desire for signs that are just out of reach'. Lukes, (2005) argues that inequality driven by the market plays a more direct role in the lives of individuals in a society where it is increasingly the norm for one to offer one's kidney for sale or to sell their reproductive capacity. By comparison to Anna, such cases might be argued to be quite straightforward as in an egalitarian society, one might imagine that Prince Valentino might not have perceived the need to undergo invasive surgery, nor would Mary Beth Whitehead, the mother of "Baby M" he discusses, have needed to become a surrogate out of necessity, nor suffered the indignity of being informed by a judge that she was not a mother but a contractor with the sperm donor.

In relation to the above it is interesting that no-one picked up on Kotler's (1972) distinction between real interests and short-term desires and his arguments in relation to pleasing but harmful products. Perhaps his argument was regarded as unrealistic, given it was aimed at the producers of harmful products such as tobacco and alcohol, which, as discussed in chapter seven have since fought tooth and nail to preserve their interests. From Lukes' (2021) one way in which to define real interests is by following Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Nussbaum handily offers a set of ten capabilities which can each be specified as questions and below I modify the first two questions to fit the context of marketing,

To what extent do marketing practices enable the ability for an individual to live a human life of normal length, not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living?

Although some might point to rapid increases in life expectancy in the modern period this has recently plateaued and even gone into reverse. On the downside are questions pertaining to the marketing of harmful products, which cause lung cancer (tobacco), obesity and Type 2 diabetes (Ultra-Processed Foods) and cirrhosis of the liver (Alcohol). For instance, a recent report described the UK as the 'sick man of Europe' with almost three million people of working age listed as economically inactive due to long term sickness.¹⁰⁵¹ This was not evenly spread but was concentrated in fifty localities. The authors reported high correlations between economic inactivity, consumption of alcohol, junk food and tobacco, obesity and illness. These contributed to differences in life expectancy, of over twenty years between those living in such blackspots compared to

¹⁰⁵⁰ Day, (2025, 22).

¹⁰⁵¹ Commission on Health and Property, (2024). *Cross-party Commission concludes three-year enquiry with bold plan for 21st century health*, IPPR, 17th September.

more affluent areas¹⁰⁵². Additionally, Lukes (2005) discusses a number of harms caused by the market such as unequal access to healthcare and market failure in privatized healthcare.

Nussbaum's second question on bodily health has been modified to ask;

to what extent do marketing practices enable the individual to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

The chronic rise in obesity levels linked to consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) leading to type two diabetes and the prevalence of cancer brought on by smoking and alcohol abuse, many today live with chronic conditions such as obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction. Especially pernicious is the damage that is largely hidden from consumers that is caused by the extractive industries, the pesticides and chemicals, industrial pollution and the export of waste. While the dangers associated with products such as cigarettes and alcohol are 'known-knowns', 'known-unknowns' comprise those risks that industry insiders may be concerned about but don't fully understand which in an ideal world ought to be taken as subjects for research. These 'unknown-knowns' quite often relate to products that are produced by companies which maintain a 'low-profile' and may be present in entire ranges of goods.

Taking Action

Following Lukes' prescription, the counterfactual applied to the above is that inequality works against the real interests of the individual, as given the choice, one would not expect a person to choose to die twenty years earlier than their neighbours who live a few short miles away, nor to grow obese, nor succumb to the malign consequences of Type 2 diabetes. The model followed by the UK food industry since the Second World War has been to manufacture cheap, ersatz foods such as "chocolate" that contains just 10% to 20% cocoa with the bulk consisting of sugar and fat. Some press for government action to increase taxation of products such as ice-cream, chocolate, pizza, burgers and other highly ultra-processed foods whose over-consumption can lead to serious harm for consumers. On the other side, the argument voiced by industry is that consumers enjoy these foods and that to attempt to limit their choice by making them more expensive would be to interfere with their sovereign right to choose. There may well be some truth to this as many economically disadvantaged people enjoy the cheap, highly processed food they are condemned to eat, and may well refuse the nourishing food, they are refused on account of its expense; indeed Bourdieu's point in relation to *amor fati* is that they will refuse it no matter what!. That said, it is possible to gain the support of economically disadvantaged groups for initiatives that offer to directly affect their lives for the better. The successful implementation of the 'Healthy Philadelphia Initiative' in 2017 described in chapter six, which added 1.5 cents per ounce tax on all sweetened beverages sold in the city represented a small but significant advance by reducing the consumption of sugar,

¹⁰⁵² Other reports state that the majority of those living in the most deprived areas of England are overweight (71%) or obese (36%) and are physically inactive (35%) compared to 16% in the least deprived areas. While almost twenty percent of all ten-to-eleven, year-olds are described as obese, this was much higher amongst disadvantaged groups

that also crucially gained the agreement of low-income parents if spent on support for education.

Expanding Marketing to Study Power and Real Interests

Reviewing the first three years of their tenure, in 2025 the editors of the *Journal of Marketing* proclaimed their bold intention to frame the journal as a, ‘catalyst...where diverse ideas could encounter one another to spark new insights that drive the field forward’, and later to, ‘propose new paradigms that confront established frameworks’.¹⁰⁵³ These are laudable ambitions although they rather lack detail. And while, as mentioned in chapter three, journal editors have now broadened their scope to recognise the interests of stakeholders other than marketing management, this remains the dominant perspective adopted by the vast majority of publications. Critics argue that taken in the round this research paints a picture of positive agency and ‘can do’ that reflects a neoliberal ideology which presents the ever-expanding market for commodities as the main, if not the sole locus, where the individual, conceptualised as an active agent, can realise their identity, discover a sense of self-worth and form communal bonds.

Marketers often complain about the lack of attention paid to their findings and arguments by their colleagues in sister disciplines, never mind politicians, policy makers and the general public. If my cursory review of articles published in the *Journal of Marketing* is anything to go by, this is understandable, as there has been little attempt to understand power or its operation beyond the confines of the organisation in a business-to-business context.¹⁰⁵⁴ Yet, as argued by marketers over the years (Kotler, 1972; Fitchett et al. 2015; Hunt et al., 2020; and Day, 2025) it is essential that marketing academics widen their remit to take the real interests of consumers and of those beyond the consumer into account.

Conclusion

The content of this chapter is rather dense and re-reading it has been heavy-going even for me. I am also reminded of how partial the above account is and the important to gain your own understanding of Lukes. When I started this chapter I knew that I would have to suspend my disbelief in relation to real interests if I was to get anywhere, and now I admit that over time my scepticism has faded and begun to turn towards endorsement, as the realisation has dawned that there is a difference between thinking of a power that is ubiquitous and can be seen everywhere and anywhere, and power involving real interests, comprising power that counts, that focuses on what really matters in a specific context.

¹⁰⁵³ Lamberton et al., (2025).

¹⁰⁵⁴ I stopped at fifty articles as “power” became less relevant from then onwards. Overall results were: Power in channel governance (8); purchase/ buying/market power (6); power of marketing in C-suite (2); Power of marketing department (2); Power of advertising/ research (2); Power of celebrity (2); sales management (1); power of names/scent/pack design (2); Power-distance, (2); monopoly power (2); Machiavellianism (1); bargaining power (1); discretionary spending (1); cognitive lock-in (1); intersectionality (1); agriculture (1). The article by Gielens et al., (2018), which discusses Wal-Mart is relevant to discussion of issues in chapter six.

Raising the question of real interests can help us to remove ourselves from the orbit of those who, by dint of their scintillating wit and extraordinary eloquence, can enchant us through the arts of rhetoric to subscribe to their unsubstantiated generalisations and to focus instead on evidence based on real cases. That said I am rather concerned by other aspects of Lukes' argument, as for instance in relation to consciousness-raising by those subjected to power, where his argument ultimately relies on the imputation of real-interests from the outside and thereby lays it open to potential abuse. I remain uneasy too by talk about authenticity which can return us to the rather spurious arguments for a division between "physiological" and "psychological" needs that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Nussbaum (2000) formulates this issue somewhat differently in terms of capabilities and functionings, does she really get away from this dichotomy at the end of the day?

Even if the conception of real interests is problematic, consideration of questions pertaining to interests asks us to think carefully about what power is and particularly, as mentioned above, when it matters to us most, in situations where our interests are trampled on by power. In this respect Lukes' contribution has been to grapple with the fiendishly difficult job of building and then sustaining an argument for the operation of invisible power against critique coming from all sides, and in my view while wisely ceding some ground he has done a good job in trying to holding his general line.

Rationality, or rather failures of rationality, are key to Lukes' argument for three-dimensional power. At one stage he provides a listing of such failures as comprising, 'self-deception and wishful thinking, succumbing to cognitive biases, fallacies and illusions, errors that depend on how issues and questions are framed, ignorance of the principles of statistical inference, and so on'.¹⁰⁵⁵ He later mentions that although Bourdieu's theory of a pre-discursive 'inscription of social structure onto bodies'¹⁰⁵⁶, is interesting as a 'suggestive metaphor', but '(w)here, when and how does tacit, practical embodied knowledge set limits to 'discursive' learning and self-transformation?'.¹⁰⁵⁷ In respect of this he argues that bodily dispositions change and that decades of feminism have made their mark on how young women view and hold their bodies.

The above list of failures of rationality is rather jumbled. References to cognitive biases and fallacies, Lukes implicitly acknowledge Kahneman's (2011) distinction between the slow effortful processes of reflexive consciousness (System Two) and System One that works automatically and non-consciously to retrieve information. Lukes argues that we can be schooled to think reflexively, so as to avoid the traps posed by our proneness to bias. What then of perceptual processes such as illusions? When looking at Muller-Lyer lines "we" cannot help but see one line as longer than the other, even though "we" know that they are of the same length.¹⁰⁵⁸ This invites the suggestion that one "me" is looking

¹⁰⁵⁵ Lukes, (2021, 121).

¹⁰⁵⁶ Lukes, (20212, 147).

¹⁰⁵⁷ Lukes, 2021, 148).

¹⁰⁵⁸ Segall et al., 1966; Henrich et al., (2010).

at the image while a different “me” judges it objectively. Images of the body are emotionally resonant and researchers have found that viewing images of the bodies of others provokes changes in the perception of one’s own body image.¹⁰⁵⁹ Body-image comparison thus has a mimetic aspect as it is shared within a group context and occurs in milliseconds.¹⁰⁶⁰

There is support for Lukes’ (2021) contention that Bourdieu’s argument about the stickiness of dispositions is too deterministic. Although this was a small-scale interpretive study, Thompson and Haytko (1997) noted a changing body-image ideal in young female American college students. These young women had distanced themselves from advertising portrayals of the ‘waif look’, they described as disgusting, orienting themselves instead towards a new standard of attractiveness that was muscular, ‘fit and toned’. In particular, they disparaged Twiggy, whose thin demeanour was presented as an exemplar to adolescent girls in the 1960s and also Kate Moss, as “oppressive icons”. Importantly, Thompson and Haytko qualify their discussion by writing, “and yet”, to signify that despite their stated resistance to these idealised images which they found disgusting, the topic of body image was also evidently unsettling and aroused deep emotions in these young women.¹⁰⁶¹

It is noteworthy that while Lukes (2021) spends most of his time discussing how reflexive consciousness is undermined, he does not venture into much detail himself in specifying the mechanisms involved at what level of consciousness. Consideration of this complex question invites exploration of the role played by emotion, images and mimetic relation as in addition to reflexive and automatic consciousness in the formation of of the subject. With respect to the question posed by Lukes of the subject’s *willing* compliance to power, while this is speculative I find that the subject conceived of by neuro-psychoanalytic theory may ultimately offer a more adequate adequate account by recognising that personhood is layered, comprising three broad interconnecting regions. In this understanding the reflexive self, which houses the “subject”, is scaffolded on top of an ontologically more primitive formation described as the external body, which houses exteroceptive consciousness and mimetic processes, and this is in turn scaffolded on top of the internal body, which is ontologically more primitive than the external body, and is the seat of the basic emotions and of interoceptive awareness.¹⁰⁶² From this one might conjecture that it is possible that the young women described by Thompson and Haytko

¹⁰⁵⁹ Hawkins et al. (2004); Grogan, (2005; 2021). Grogan also discusses marked changes in body image perception amongst young men.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Although the setting used by Dixon et al. (2009) was artificial, men typically took 200 milliseconds to notice a woman’s waistline or breasts.

¹⁰⁶¹ From Thompson & Haytko, (1997: 31). Indeed at time of writing, in 2024 it appears that the ‘waif’ look is back with the editor of Vogue lamenting the employment of models of size 4 to size 8 (McIntosh, S. (2024). Vogue boss ‘concerned’ by return to skinny models. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1knp890nrno#:~:text=The%20fashion%20industry%20%22should%20be,rise%20in%20popularity%20of%20Ozempic.>

¹⁰⁶² There is no space here to more fully describe this but see for neuropsychanalysis, Solms & Turnbull, (2002); Solms & Panksepp, (2010) and for body image effects, Dixon et al., (2011); Grogan, (2017; 2021) and Hawkins et al., (2004).

(1997) expressed disgust at viewing such images whilst unknown to “themselves” at a more primal level they desired to emulate them, thus provoking a powerful emotional reaction. From this perspective, to ask the question posed by Lukes of the subject’s *willing* compliance to power, requires another question, as to which of the three elements of consciousness had the upper hand in the exchange; was this the internal self, the external self, or the reflexive self?

Lukes contribution lives on in the work of John Gaventa (1980), whose work is not discussed here but whose Powercube should be relevant to questions of interest to marketers. In the Powercube Gaventa (1980) incorporates Lukes’ invisible power along with the first and second dimensions. In doing so his explanation moves beyond episodic towards cumulative relations, such that A’s repeated use of power in the first dimension enables A’s extend control through the mobilization of bias in the second dimension, extending in the third dimension by shaping B’s wants. Cumulatively, following each defeat, B’s feeling of powerlessness is further sedimented and the more that B withdraws, the more A can develop ideologies that further affect the conceptions of B which increases the susceptibility of B to introject A’s values.

The power of A to prevail in the first dimension increases the power to affect B’s actions in the second dimension and increases the power to affect B’s conceptions in the third.¹⁰⁶³

There are also differences between Gaventa and Lukes. For instance, the former argues that false consciousness is an inappropriate term because, “if consciousness exists it is real to its holders”. His point is that one needs to be more specific in discussing consciousness, for instance, does it reflect awareness of certain interests and not others, or has it been developed under the undue influence of A?¹⁰⁶⁴.

The Powercube is also useful in the context of marketing because it provides a span from the local to the global and through the idea of open, invited and closed spaces. When applied to cases such as that of child labour in Bangladesh discussed in chapter six; for instance, most of the publications based on interview material arose from ‘invitations’ from NGOs, whilst government and business remained closed spaces. Consequently, we still know virtually nothing regarding the viewpoints of, or the relevant interactions between those representing the BGMEA, the Bangladeshi government and global brands such as Wal-Mart and Levis-Strauss Corporation.

Coda

Gaventa’s notion of ‘closed’ spaces, invites the question as to what happens inside the ‘black box’ that drives forward the policy of a corporation or indeed that of an industry?

From the outside, a corporation can be conceived of as unitary rather than as a constellation of competing interests, foremost amongst which is supposedly the shareholder interest. Outsiders are most often entirely unaware of the tussles that occur within the ‘C-Suite’ and beyond, as even when some who are forced to leave following a

¹⁰⁶³ Gaventa, (1980, 22).

¹⁰⁶⁴ Gaventa, (1980, 277).

dispute, information is hard to glean as they have usually been gagged by some form of 'non-disclosure' agreement.

Imagine that you are the marketing director of a multi-billion-dollar corporation that produces a range of physical products that carry certain risks to human health, and as CMO have just arrived to appraise the CEO and the Board of Directors of the information you have just learned from your meeting with a product liability lawyer. The lawyer has just informed you that, *"a plaintiff would be greatly benefited by evidence which tended to establish actual knowledge on the part of your company that using your product can be dangerous to health, that certain ingredients are dangerous and should be removed, or that using it causes a particular disease"*.¹⁰⁶⁵ Moreover, if were to be proven that your corporation knew about this danger for some time, the jury could award punitive damages running to millions and in the case of a class-action suit, this could cost billions and even threaten the existence of this hundred-year old business.

The above italicised section is the actual advice given in secret in 1970 by David Hardy of product liability lawyers Shookman, Hardy, Ottoman, Mitchell and Bacon to Brown Williamson tobacco Corporation. According to the *BBC Panorama*, this advice had a "profound influence on the whole industry strategy" and played a major role in persuading the industry that to admit the truth about what it knew about the links between smoking, cancer and other diseases would be disastrous, resulting in millions of dollars in punitive damages. As the programme-makers explained, from then on the industry had to deceive in order to survive.

The covert action of the tobacco industry in 1970 to wilfully cover up what it knew by continuing to deceive the public, more properly accords with the second dimension of power. It is also an example of the power of the law and of the lawyers, that operated for good and for bad in the context of the 'rules-based-order' of the Pax Americana. It is notable that half of all of the Presidents of the USA were lawyers, including, Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, Clinton, Obama and Biden.¹⁰⁶⁶ Chapter five discussed the decisive role played by Robert Bork in persuading the Supreme Court to change the criteria on mergers and thus paving the way for the construction of the grossly distorted corporate landscape we inhabit today; while on the other hand, thousands seek redress through the law for harms done to them by the actions or products made by corporations; and as discussed in chapter six, international law provided the means to secure the Memorandum of Understanding to protect the interests of child labourers in Bangladesh. Perhaps for better but probably for worse, perhaps much worse, the rules of the game have changed as the rules-based order dominated by lawyers has been vanquished by a new order, where might is right.

¹⁰⁶⁵ This quote is voiced by Tom Mangold in, *Pack of Lies*, (1993) BBC Panorama. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GcAhmbdBNM>

¹⁰⁶⁶ Lawline Staff Writer (2023). The long history of America's lawyer presidents. *Lawline*, 2nd March. <https://blog.lawline.com/the-long-history-of-americas-lawyer-presidents#:~:text=U.S. Presidents Who Were Lawyers,half of all U.S. presidents>.

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Chapter Nine: Foucault

Introduction

Some suggest that Foucault opened a fourth dimension of power by exploring issues beyond those addressed by Dahl, Galbraith and Lukes.¹⁰⁶⁷ Whether or not that is so, his approach differs in that he delighted in challenging and subverting orthodoxy. For instance, in the series of seminars published as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault (2003) reversed Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means. By taking war, as opposed to the Philosophy of Right as the lens through which to view politics and power, Foucault argued that truth is not neutral, but is rather used as a weapon to justify an historically partisan victory; put plainly, the supposed "truth" of history is written by the victor (Foucault, 2004: 57). In so doing he wilfully placed himself on the margins, identifying himself with the sophists and against mainstream philosophy. That he did not trouble himself to discuss dimensional theories of power developed by American and British political theorists is to an extent understandable, given that his main point of reference was France. Even though he was elsewhere at the time, Foucault was deeply affected by the political upheaval that occurred in France in May 1968.¹⁰⁶⁸ His reflections on the events of May largely shaped his ideas on power as signalling a void in Marxist theory, pointing to the emptiness of abstract discussions of class, surplus value, consciousness and ideology, such that to focus narrowly on the sovereign power of the State misses out an entire nexus of power.

It can be somewhat confusing for the reader who like me is not fully conversant in French, that we have had to wait for translations of Foucault's work. This is not just down to the exigencies of translation, but rather because while some appeared rather expeditiously, others appeared many years after the original was published, notably the lectures bundled as *Society Must Be Defended*, delivered in 1975-1976, (first published in English in 2003) and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, delivered in 1978-1979 (published in English in 2008). *Discipline and Punish*, on the other hand was published in French in 1975, and appeared English translation relatively quickly in 1977, while the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published in French in 1976, appearing in translation in 1978.

¹⁰⁶⁷ See for instance Digesir, (1992).

¹⁰⁶⁸ François Ewald, in Becker, Ewald, Harcourt, (2012).

This may help explain the preponderance of articles on discipline and the repressive hypothesis by anglophone authors in the intervening period.¹⁰⁶⁹

Foucault (1982) divided his work into three periods. In the early stage he explored how versions of the subject were created by science and economics. He then turned to study the period in the seventeenth century when the emergent field of psychiatry developing dividing practices to sequester the mad from the sane, the sick from the healthy and criminals from “good boys” (Foucault, 1982: 777). His subsequent work on the development of disciplinary power and biopower can be seen as complements to this project as they explain how, in the modern nation-state, these forms of power came to be exercised over juridically free subjects. Then the broader question of how the government of citizens changed in the transition from the ‘raison d’etat’ of the police state, to the operation of power contemporary market societies. Foucault’s last project focused on ancient Greece and the early Christian period to illustrate how individuals turned themselves into subjects of sexuality (Foucault, 1982: 778). His status as an historian was controversial, rejected by conventionalists who took a jaundiced view, describing him as an “antihistorical historian” (Poster, 1982) who played fast and loose with historical facts.

Given that Foucault coined a series of concepts such as *dispositif*, *episteme*, *genealogy* and *governmentality*, then one might reasonably expect to find some form of clear definition of these terms. However, as noted by Rene Ten Bos, Foucault’s accounts are elliptic and vague, provoking scholars in organization studies to respond by providing clear definitions. Ten Bos argues to the contrary that such attempts are mistaken as they fail to grasp Foucault’s catachrestic philosophy. Catachresis usually refers to using a word mistakenly, for instance, “alibi” instead of “excuse”. Ten Bos’s point is that Foucault, who was acutely aware of the framing power of language, saw the role of philosophy as to produce concepts. In this view, a signifier such as *governmentality* should be freed from its traditional associations and given rein to inhabit new and different semantic fields (Ten Bos, 2010). Whether Ten Bos is correct in asserting this is a moot point, however, given the laxity of Foucault’s descriptions, the following account seeks to retain something of that looseness.

Dispositif and Episteme

Foucault was antithetical to abstract theorisations of power such as those formulated by Hobbes’ theory of Leviathan, or the dialectic. He was suspicious of the presumption that

¹⁰⁶⁹ Raffnsøe et al., (2019), argue that articles on discipline formed the first wave of Foucault-inspired commentary and research in organization studies. This proved very influential, because of its ‘striking and graphic analysis and because of the potency of the image of the Panopticon. In the authors’ view this led to an over-emphasis on discipline that had a distending effect on the literature. The authors note that the focus of *Discipline and Punish* is from 1840 to 1860AD and that by the time the book was published in 1975, discipline “no longer seemed natural and inevitable”. They mention too that Foucault differentiated between the ideal of a disciplinarian society from the reality of a disciplined society.

concepts pass down unchanged from one generation to the next and that to explore the dimension of subjectivity requires that one becomes attuned to the system of symbolic classification prevalent in a given culture at a given time. These concerns are reflected in his development of the related concepts of *dispositif* and *episteme*. These concepts are not easy to understand at first but hopefully make more sense as one becomes attuned to his concern to focus on specifics. A *dispositif* refers to a combination of physical and discursive ways of ordering in a particular domain that makes a certain understanding or action in that domain possible. Take for example the domain of sexuality. In the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes how the modern concept of sexuality would have made little sense to the ancient Greeks, whose *dispositif* centred on *aphrodisia*, which linked bodies to pleasures, such that the relation of self to others was concerned with acts and not as today, with identities. In volume three he discusses in more detail the differences between early Greek and early Christian works, while the fourth volume considers how *aphrodisia* came to be replaced by a *dispositif* centred around the Christian concept of the flesh. So rather than assuming an unvarying meaning of sex, “aphrodisia”, “the flesh” and the modern concept of,

sexuality” are specific to a particular time and place, constituting three modes that tell us something different about what we now call sex and also about subjectivity and truth.¹⁰⁷⁰

Genealogy

In the early works Foucault studied systems of knowledge in Europe from the Renaissance, to the Classical and Modern periods, to argue that it is wrong to think of knowledge as a gradual progression of ideas. Rather, each historical period was governed by a distinctive episteme or structure of thought that moderated the production of discourse on topics such as life, language and labour. From this one can detect the seeds of the idea that truth does not exist independently of the discourse that produces it. In a controversial move which distanced him from more conventional historians, Foucault later developed from Nietzsche, the genealogical approach. In an interview he explained that genealogy begins by posing a question in the present time and then working backwards to try to explain how this state of affairs came to be (Kritzman, 1988: 262). For example, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1978) locates the abstract model for the spatial, embodied, control of the citizen in modern disciplinary societies in the panopticon, devised by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. Genealogy does not search for origins but seeks to describe the “erratic and discontinuous process whereby the past became the present”.¹⁰⁷¹ Genealogy also informs our understanding of the present by bringing to light hidden conflicts of the past (Garland, 2014).

¹⁰⁷⁰ This section is informed by Foucault, in Callewaert, (2017: 43) and by Elden (2021).

¹⁰⁷¹ Garland, (2014: 372).

The Subject....and Power

Aside from *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's most condensed comments on power are made in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and in *The Subject and Power* (1982) and what follows is heavily influenced by my reading of the latter. Foucault's ruminations on the aftermath of the events in France during 1968 convinced him that to focus narrowly on the sovereign power of the State misses out an entire nexus of power. Power does not come from the top down but from the bottom up involving a host of agencies, in the absence of which one cannot provide a theory of the State. Consequently, although discussion of the State features in many of his works, Foucault felt that a wider, more expansive theory of government was required. This led him to consider a dimension of collective experience hitherto unexplored, the micropolitical dimension, pertaining to the specifics of how power is exercised over individuals and how it circulates through networks, together with the actual practices of subjugation;¹⁰⁷²

This is exerted over things and gives the ability to modify, use, consume or destroy them. It is a question of "capacity". It brings into play relations between individuals, that certain individuals exercise power over others. (Foucault, 1982: 786).

Power involves a relationship between human beings where certain actions modify others. Moreover, it exists only when it is put into action. One should thus analyse institutions from the perspective of power relations and not vice versa.¹⁰⁷³ Power relations are located deep in the social nexus and are not "above" society as a supplementary structure. Power can only be articulated on the basis of two indispensable elements; that the "other" on whom power is exercised is recognised as person who acts and from this that when faced with a relationship of power a whole field of responses may open up. While at one extreme this relation may involve violence (when power is forced to remove its mask), and at the other extreme, consent, these are the instruments or the outcomes of power, not its essence. Rather the basic nature of power is, "(a) total structure of actions brought to bear on possible actions, it incites, it induces, it seduces". Garland's (1995) understanding of this is one should consider that all social relations intertwine with power relations which involve an asymmetrical balance of forces. One should not consider that these forces operate within a social whole such as "society", but rather across disparate multiple fields. Garland notes how Foucault's "special focus" was not on groups, nor on individuals who dominate or are dominated, but on how power relations are organized and the techniques they depend on. At the extreme it forbids, absolutely. The exercise of power involves guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome."¹⁰⁷⁴ When power is defined as a mode of action on the

¹⁰⁷² See B. Jessop (2014) and Francois Ewald on the discussion by him, Bernard Harcourt and Jesus Velasco (2015) entitled: Foucault: May 1968. <https://michel-foucault.com/2015/06/23/foucault-and-may-1968-2015/>.

¹⁰⁷³ Foucault, (1982: 791).

¹⁰⁷⁴ Foregoing references are to Foucault, (1982: 789).

actions of others, characterised by the government of some people by others, freedom is important. Notwithstanding the ultimate possibility of violence, power is only exercised over free subjects and only insofar as they are free. This means that the field of possibility includes several alternative modes of behaving, at the heart of which, “and constantly provoking it is a recalcitrance of the will”.¹⁰⁷⁵

Near the beginning of *The Subject and Power*, Foucault (1982) remarks that it is not power, but rather the subject that constitutes the general theme of his research. Power is of course heavily implicated in the formation of the subject and particularly in the ascription of identity. But that is getting ahead of the argument. What does Foucault mean by the subject? He shared with Lacan the notion the notion that the “subject” is not what is given us by nature, such as how short or tall we are, but rather pertains to our formation as symbolic beings who are subjects of and subjected to the language and culture we are born into. For him there are two meanings of subject; subject to someone else by control and dependence, and being tied to one’s identity by a conscience or self-knowledge”.¹⁰⁷⁶ Foucault (1982) revisits the theme that informs his lecture series *Society Must Be Defended*, by inviting us to consider power as a struggle, naming three kinds; struggles against discrimination, whether this is ethnic, religious or social; struggles against exploitation that separates the individual from what they produce; finally, struggles against what ties the individual to himself and which thereby submits him to others. He mentions that quite often these are mixed up although one is usually dominant. In the nineteenth century it was exploitation, whereas at the time of writing it took the form of resistance against forms of subjection.¹⁰⁷⁷ He elaborates that these are struggles for and against the government of individualisation. Identity is a constraint such that the individual on the one hand asserts their right to be different, while on the other hand they attack everything that separates them, breaks their link with others, splits up community, “forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his identity in a constraining way”.¹⁰⁷⁸

This form of power attaches itself to immediate, everyday life, which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.¹⁰⁷⁹ What exactly does “being tied to

¹⁰⁷⁵ Foucault, 1982: 790).

¹⁰⁷⁶ Foucault, (1982: 781). Foucault, unlike Norbert Elias does not discuss any form of internal division of the subject, as as that made by Freud. This comment on being tied to one’s identity ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ seems to come as close as he ever gets, but raises some intriguing questions. While “conscience” is not all that different from the Freudian superego, it is hard to fathom what Foucault is getting at by referring to self-knowledge. Answers on a postcard please!

¹⁰⁷⁷ Foucault, (1982, 782).

¹⁰⁷⁸ Foucault, (1982, 781).

¹⁰⁷⁹ Foucault, (1982, (781).

one's identity" mean? Foucault's argument seems to run along similar lines to Lacan's concept of the Symbolic, the pre-existing system of culture we are born into which classifies according to a binary logic even prior to birth. Understood in this sense, Foucault, writing more than forty years ago was prescient in noticing that even then, "(m)aybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse who we are".¹⁰⁸⁰ Foucault recognised the dynamic nature of the symbolic system we are enmeshed in and from this that to explore the dimension of subjectivity requires that one becomes attuned to the symbolic system of classification prevalent in a given culture at a given time. This is exemplified in his method, which focused on systems of classification at specific times and in specific places. It seems obvious that the symbolic system at work today is not the same as that which prevailed in the 1980s, nor indeed, the 1790s. It would not thus make much sense to consider power today as solely constituted as a disciplinary regime nor in terms of the neoliberalism of the 1980s.

The development of these dividing practices was important as they substituted the idea of a psychological identity, considered fixed and immutable, from what previously had been understood as sporadic manifestations of reprehensible behaviour. The concepts of disciplinary power and biopower melded into this project as they explain how, in the modern nation-state, these forms of power came to be exercised over juridically free subjects. Where discipline is suggestive of a largely passive subject who is moulded by power, Foucault's final project considered how the individual turns him or herself into a subject, by seeing themselves for instance as a subject of sexuality.¹⁰⁸¹ He argues that there was a gap when it came to studying power which was almost exclusively the province of legal studies such as what constitutes legitimate power. To study power requires an understanding of the historical conditions that structure our conceptualization. Additionally, we should not take reality for granted but need to know the type of reality we are talking about.

Critique of the Philosophy of Right

The philosophy of right refers to the concern of Western philosophers and jurists since feudal times, to justify and explicate the limits of royal power, which had to be seen as right, or as limited by being subjected to rules.¹⁰⁸² In an early lecture from *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault focuses in particular on Thomas Hobbes as a prominent philosopher of right. As is mentioned in chapter four, Hobbes developed his concept of Leviathan not long after the shock of the execution of the English king and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy. Hobbes argued from the premise that human

¹⁰⁸⁰ Foucault, (1982, 785).

¹⁰⁸¹ Foucault, (1982, 778). The last three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* are devoted to explaining very different forms of subjectivity prevailing in early Greece and the early Christian period.

¹⁰⁸² Foucault, (200,: 25-26).

nature is invariably vain and selfish and that given a scarcity of desirable objects, individuals who are motivated by a common desire for an object will soon quarrel and fight over its possession. Given this situation, individuals live in constant fear for their property and for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The solution Hobbes offers to forestall this dread prospect, is that the individual members of society contract together to cede some of their powers to a third party, the sovereign, Leviathan. The sovereign absolute ruler in turns contracts with the citizens to protect the common weal, maintaining peace through the administration of impartial justice. This preserves order, as the individual who breaks this contract by harming another, is made accountable to sovereign justice.

While there is insufficient space here to reprise Foucault's entire critique, his basic argument is that Hobbes' abstract conception of sovereign power deflects from and masks the real history of England, following the Norman Conquest.¹⁰⁸³ Where a "Hobbesian" view sought to justify the Norman invasion of England as right and proper and thus to legitimise it, Foucault argues that the real outcome was a continuing struggle between the Norman invaders and the indigenous population, which they had conquered and subjected. Hobbes' abstract scheme elides this struggle of the dispossessed from history as in his view, "no matter what, it is you the subjects who constitute the sovereignty that represents you (Foucault, 2003: 98).

Since Foucault wrote about this, the idea that all of those who are ruled willingly accede to this state of affairs and consequently, that society can be thought of as an organic whole shaped in the figure of Leviathan has come under intense scrutiny. His critique of Hobbes is relevant in light of recent re-evaluations of the sociology of modernism that are complementary to the discussion of slavery in chapter five of this text. Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) criticize the founding fathers of sociology, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, who wrote at the height of European imperialism in the late nineteenth century, for paying scant attention to the ongoing violent colonization of other peoples. They argue that the key presumptions of liberalism, which envisaged the modern sovereign state as delineated by clear boundaries and possessing an autonomous economy acted to mask the reality of empire, colonial dispossession and appropriation. They date this fiction to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, made just three years before the publication of Leviathan. Hobbes' vision of the modern state as essentially contained within its borders was linked to the belief that economic development, based on modern, rational lines, would form a sound base for future prosperity. Bhambra and Holmwood describe that what actually happened was expropriation of colonised peoples on a grand scale, involving nefarious alliances between States and capitalist enterprises such as the East India Company and the Royal Africa Company. Davies (2022) too comments that, "commerce did not, as liberals such as Hobbes liked to think, gradually displace barbaric and murderous economic practices, but grew along with them." The reality was that

¹⁰⁸³ Foucault, (2004, ch.5, 87-114).

these were empires, not bounded nation-states, which largely relied for their development and growth on the expropriation of those whom they subjugated.

Reminiscent of Foucault's critique of Hobbes, the authors argue that a paradox of modern social theory is that although it is an historically formed enterprise, 'it does not appear to be changed by changing historiographic accounts. Rather it relies on a relatively unchanging view of the rise of the West, associated with the emergence of democracy, industry and science.' The claim that modern societies are constantly on the threshold of some great change that will liberate them from the past turns out itself to be a historical relic, forged in a particular time and place, that continues to constrain our sense of chronology. In relation to consumption there is a continuing reluctance on the part of many to consider the expropriation and destruction involved in the production of many of the goods and services we take as essential to our wellbeing.

Governmentality

Late-on Foucault developed the rather clunky concept of governmentality, which nevertheless encapsulates the core of his project.¹⁰⁸⁴ Governmentality offers an answer to the fundamental question posed by the liberal order to the question of power, which is, how to structure the possible field of action of free subjects? One might venture to assert that the broad aim of Foucault's genealogical approach was to understand how, by the 1980s, individuals were no longer so much subjected to juridical power, moral sanction, or shame, but rather were constituted as free subjects who behave in rationally in accordance with the laws of the market. The principle of self-government appears at various points in Foucault's work. In the 1976 lecture series *Society Must Be Defended*, he argues that contemporary forms of self-government have their roots in Christian and military practice. The State, "that was mistrusted by everyone from left and right"¹⁰⁸⁵ in the period following the Second World War, was by then being reorganised by politicians on the model of the market economy. The key question posed by Foucault is, how did this come about? He answers that this was enabled by the development of an apparatus borrowed from the Church he calls pastoral power, which spread throughout the social body in Europe.¹⁰⁸⁶ In the new dispensation formed by the emerging nation state, pastoral power was repurposed towards a secular end, such that salvation was recontextualised to signify progressive development towards a life of security, health and wealth in this world. Foucault later discussed contemporary forms of self-government in the neoliberal era towards the end of the lecture series on biopolitics delivered in

¹⁰⁸⁴ He acknowledges this when writing that, "The governmentality or governmentability – forgive these barbaric terms – of these individuals...(Foucault, 2008: 294).

¹⁰⁸⁵ Foucault, (2008, 117).

¹⁰⁸⁶ Foucault, (1982, 784).

1978-1979¹⁰⁸⁷ and on the ideal of self-mastery as it was understood in ancient Greece.¹⁰⁸⁸

Pastoral Power

In his critique of the Philosophy of Right, Foucault argues that this philosophy had the dual effect of justifying monarchical institutions and narrowing considerations of power to focus on a sovereign/subject relation. Taken together these had the effect of blinding theorists to the emergence from the late seventeenth-century onwards, of pastoral power, borrowed from the Christian Church, which is largely incompatible with sovereign power.¹⁰⁸⁹ Pastoral power consists of two complementary roles; disciplinary power, a micro-power that constructs analyses of and pacifies the individual body, and bio-power, that operates at the macro level to manage the population as a whole. Together, these played a role in subjectification; an important point, which reminds us that Foucault's (1982) stated focus was not power per se, but rather, the subject.

Disciplinary Power

Norbert Elias shared Foucault's concern to explain how power was reconfigured in the period from the feudal era of absolute monarchy, to the formation of the modern democratic nation-state. Elias's answer to this complex question is based on increasing self-discipline. He argued that changes in the social environment (sociogenesis) impacted on the individual psyche (psychogenesis), leading to increasing self-control, which was achieved through the medium of a greatly strengthened superego. The character of the sober Puritan described by Weber fits well with this image of powerful restraint and repression of desire. In the modern period this restraint involved training in self-restraint, particularly during early childhood. Marcuse also based his explanation on the Freudian idea of repression by arguing that the bourgeois class imposed its sexual repression onto the working class, such that the nuclear family was stripped of its extended context and fitted out for work in capitalist enterprise so as to meet the demand for a stable, punctual workforce. The character of Laura Brown presented in chapter one illustrates Elias's vision of the isolated modern adult, who is troubled, not by the threat of external violence, but of violence within the psyche.

Increasing self-discipline forms an important part of the explanations provided by Elias and Marcuse. In Elias's explanation, described in chapter one, the inculcation of discipline formed a niche for the development of *homo economicus*, the repressed 'self-steered' individual, who acts rationally and reasonably. For Marcuse, this same individual was rationalized in the modern period when the critical potential of the ego was squashed

¹⁰⁸⁷ Published in English as Foucault, (2008).

¹⁰⁸⁸ *The Use of Pleasure* and *Care of the Self* first appeared in French in 1984 as *The History of Sexuality*, vols. 2 and 3, respectively.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Foucault, (2004:35-36).

such that all desire became subjected to social control. While discipline and self-restraint also feature in Foucault's explanation, his account is more encompassing, challenging both Elias and Marcuse. One difference pertains to the method of study. Elias's explanation was largely based on his empirical study of manuals aimed at the European upper classes that served as guides to manners. Foucault in his various projects also focused on Europe, from the time of the ancient Greeks to the modern period. In one set of projects he explored the changing judicial and penal system in Europe, largely England and France, as the basis for his critique of the philosophy of right, which provides the philosophical basis for the foundation of modern democracy.

Even although he was elsewhere at the time, the political upheaval in France during May 1968 was formative for Foucault.¹⁰⁹⁰ He reflected that these events signalled a crisis in Marxism, pointing to the emptiness of abstract discussion of class, surplus value, consciousness and ideology. He also distinguished the modern history of civil rights from the emergence of disciplinary power; where rights codify and govern the *de jure* relationship between government and citizens, disciplinary power insinuates itself into power over the individual body. Furthermore, the focus by authors on the philosophy of right and on rights effectively masked the emergence of disciplinary power. Foucault argued that in the transition from absolute monarchy to the modern nation-state, the state changed complexion, becoming more diffuse, surrounding itself with ancillary agencies that shared its progressive goal, such as charities, businesses, medical practice, schools and universities, mental institutions, the penal system and the family. Exercised through these dispersed institutions disciplinary power emerged as more effective than sovereign power in defining the modern individual, as disciplinary technologies and human sciences create and maintain forms of individuality (or rather, identity). Thus, given the multiplicity of agencies involved, to focus purely on the sovereign power of the state would be to miss out an entire nexus of power from the bottom up, comprising a micropolitics of power that is engaged in by a host of agencies, without which one cannot provide a theory of the State. Consequently, although several of his works are devoted to discussion of the State, Foucault's point is that what is required is a wider theory of government, turning to explore a dimension of collective experience that hitherto had been left unexplored, to argue that the study of power should focus on micropolitics, the specifics of how power is exercised over individuals and the actual practices of subjugation and that power circulates through networks.¹⁰⁹¹

Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1977) begins with a visceral illustration of the exercise of the power of the absolute monarch by providing an account of the execution of the regicide Damiens, Foucault explains how this ostentatious display of sporadic, extreme violence was gradually replaced by a new form of power, disciplinary power, that was

¹⁰⁹⁰ Comment by François Ewald in Harcourt et al. (2012).

¹⁰⁹¹ See Jessop, B. (2006) and Francois Ewald in discussion with Bernard Harcourt and Jesus Velasco (2015) entitled: Foucault: May 1968. <https://michel-foucault.com/2015/06/23/foucault-and-may-1968-2015/>.

conducive to the government of free citizens and consumers. Disciplinary power was regular and rationally administered by experts, a decentralised and multifarious power that was tied to knowledge through the construction of the subjectivities of those governed by it.

An important aspect of Foucault's argument that directly addresses Elias and critical theorists such as Marcuse, is his putative rejection of what is called the "repressive hypothesis".¹⁰⁹² Repression plays a direct role in Elias's explanation which foregrounds the enhanced power of the superego in the modern democratic state. In contrast Foucault was not at all interested in discussing the existence or workings of supposed internal agencies. Nor was he convinced that the period from the late eighteenth, to the early nineteenth century was a time of sexual repression. He contended that the opposite was the case, as during this period sexuality was discussed as never before, as a subject of concern. This occurred through the development of a discourse on sexuality in the emerging field of psychiatry, based on the revelation of the most intimate details of sexual life to medics by their bourgeois clients. Reading Foucault more closely, his denial of repression is not as sharp as it first seems, for he does not deny that publicly, a more prudish public sensibility developed towards the expression of sexuality. Rather he is pointing to the private sphere of confidential exchanges between medics and their patients when sexual practices were opened to scientific enquiry and codified as never before, with the aim to identify and pathologize deviations from the heterosexual norm.

Where Marcuse and others argued that sexual repression was foisted onto the working classes Foucault highlighted this emergent discourse of 'normal sexuality' that was first applied to the bourgeois class by its own members. As with Norbert Elias, conflict between social classes plays a role in Foucault's explanation. In volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, he revisits the events of the 18th century, when the rising bourgeois class began seriously to compete with the nobility. At that time a prevailing belief going back to the notion of the "divine right" of the monarch was that the noble is *naturally* superior to members of other classes. When it came to matters of distinction the nobility had an ace up their sleeves, based on the common belief at the time that their superior social status was divinely ordained, based on their 'breeding' or 'blue-blood'. The challenge for the bourgeois was how to compete against such pedigree? Foucault states simply that the bourgeois class: 'converted the blue blood of the nobles into a sound organism and a healthy sexuality'.¹⁰⁹³ What he means by this is that the bourgeois became preoccupied with ensuring and increasing the normality, health and longevity of their "stock". The creation of a 'healthy' sexuality involved the identification and rooting out of all that was perceived to be unhealthy in the social body of the bourgeois class. This involved the construction of a 'body' of knowledge by medics and other experts (who were of course themselves bourgeois).

¹⁰⁹² Foucault, (1978: ch.2: 36-49).

¹⁰⁹³ Source: Foucault, (1979: 126).

Foucault contended that the mechanism for revealing this knowledge was borrowed from the Church in the form of the confessional. Individuals were encouraged to confess their diverse problems to the medics and the medics in turn came up with a range of perversions and other 'unnatural' sexual identities that deviated from the heterosexual norm. Sexuality thus began to be seen as an object for psychiatric attention, via the understanding of the aetiology (cause) of 'nervous disorders' and the labelling and understanding of 'mental illnesses'. The role of the medical expert was to identify the 'unnatural' or 'perverted' in the same way that a surgeon might identify a lesion. An entire mechanism of power was thus brought to bear on the bodies of individuals, by singly out and sequestering practices deemed abnormal. Foucault noted an important difference between the traditional treatment of perverse behaviours by the Christian Church and the new approach developed by medics. The focus of Christianity had been on the act or the sin; 'buggery' was thus deemed to be a repugnant act for which a person should confess and do penance. The new medicine on the other hand located the act as an essential part of the identity of the person. Thus, a scattered set of perverse practices (sins for which one did penance) became solidified and essentialized in the construction and ascription of an identity foisted on a person. Consequently, individuals identified on the basis of their sexual orientation towards others of the same sex were classified as 'homosexual'. Where 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species'.¹⁰⁹⁴

Initially the actions of the medics focused solely on the bourgeoisie, in identifying deviancy and in seeking to prevent this or to cure it. The creation of healthy bodies was seen to be an essential act of self-affirmation on the part of the bourgeois class. However, with the growing power of capitalism and also in response to concerns about the spread of diseases such as cholera, the body of the 'healthy' worker began to be explored, regulated and disciplined in like manner. A concern with reform flowed also through the prison system. The ultimate aim of disciplinary techniques was to produce useful individuals and healthy vibrant bodies, through discouraging debauchery and other perversions among the general population and 'reforming' criminals so that they could become useful members of society, acting according to the principle of 'homo economicus'. Prisons became centres that sought to transform the individual through training in work according to a strict timetable and the discipline resulting from isolation in cells (a term borrowed from Christian monasticism). Most importantly the regime developed a knowledge of each individual based on detailed observation. Foucault argued that this form of disciplinary apparatus gradually permeated institutional life, integrating ideas around normalcy and the creation of 'healthy' bodies through constant surveillance, the examination and discipline that centred on pacifying the individual body through the following techniques:

¹⁰⁹⁴ Source: Foucault, (1984: 43).

- *Spatialization*: These concerned the spatial distribution of bodies – how they were separated, aligned, serialized, subjected to surveillance – and the organization of a whole field of visibility.
- *Controls*: These concerned the techniques to control the body, in order to make it more productive, for instance, through diet, exercise and drilling.
- *Technology*: The development of forms of power that were the most rational, least costly and most efficient, made possible through the development of a system of surveillance based on hierarchies, inspection, bookkeeping.

Rational disciplinary power was exercised primarily through the organization of space. The pyramid style of bureaucratic organization was apt to control the wayward activities of the populations of army camps, factories, schools and hospitals. The pyramid structure ensured constant supervision and surveillance of the spaces of the soldier, student, worker, patient and consumer. Within these disciplinary spaces behaviour was oriented around the need to measure up to the norm, where the main motivating factor was the fear of being branded abnormal. Those who excelled were awarded rank, while those who failed were subject to a range of micro-penalties. The system was thus a balance of rewards and punishments with the emphasis placed upon rewards.¹⁰⁹⁵ For example, with respect to children, meticulous attention was paid to the organization of dormitories (with or without partitions, or curtains) and the rules for monitoring recreation activities and sleep periods. In factories this consisted of control of spaces for storing materials (which could be stolen) and of time and motion studies to regulation of the work-rate of production.

The examination played a very important role in the system by classifying individuals (mad/ sane; normal/ abnormal; competent/ incompetent), qualifying (pass/ fail) , rewarding and punishing those who were subject to its discipline. This indicated a shift from the pre-modern period, when only those of high rank and status were regarded as individuals. In the new dispensation of the disciplinary regime this was reversed, as those at the bottom of the heap were individualized. Those who in pre-modern times would have been regarded as part of a mob, or a lumpen mass were transformed into a codified and disciplined body of individuals comprising soldiers, students, workers and patients.

The examination privileges the faculty of sight or vision. In the army, school, the prison and the hospital the individual is constantly on view. Discipline is exercised through the visual examination whereby those who do not measure-up to the norm may be subjected to ridicule and potential reward. According to Foucault the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light which would illuminate everything but would mask who was (or was not) behind it and would be the central point for the convergence of all that was known. This image fits almost exactly with Jeremy Bentham's design for the

¹⁰⁹⁵ This bears comparison with the incentives provided through "nudge" economics today.

Panopticon, the inspiration for the construction of Strangeways gaol in Manchester, England, among others.

Foucault argued that disciplinary mechanisms began to spill out beyond institutions such as the prison and school to permeate the whole of society. For example, as the training of children had been entrusted to teachers in schools, teachers then became interested in the quality of the life of the child beyond the school and in the activities of their parents and neighbours. He cited as early examples of more fluid disciplinary mechanisms, those religious groups that visited the poor, checking on their welfare and at the same time ensuring among other things, the 'stability' of the household and that children were not sleeping in the same beds.

Biopower

Towards the end of *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault describes the emergence of biopower, as a form that is emerged later than disciplinary power and is complementary to it. While disciplinary power is exerted on the body of the individual which it renders docile and useful so as to maximise its productivity, biopower is principally concerned with maximising the productive potential of the populace.¹⁰⁹⁶ Foucault explains that the concern with biopower began with the work of eighteenth-century demographers in compiling statistics on births and deaths.¹⁰⁹⁷ Overall management of the health of the population as a whole was not centralised but involved an interleaving set of agencies including the insurance industry, which mitigated risk,; the banking industry, which extended credit and the hygiene industry, concerned with improving the nation's health and safety. Foucault explains that these initiatives were developed as responses to statistics on mortality relating to climate and geography, such as epidemics related to living near a swamp. Like disciplinary mechanisms biopower, initiatives were designed to maximize and extract forces, to maximize the health and fitness of the populace. Research was often motivated by charitable purposes; for instance, the philanthropist Charles Booth compiled what is known today as the Booth Map with the aim to identify the poor and indigent so as to better target resources to alleviate the harm done them through excessive consumption of drink and drugs.¹⁰⁹⁸ Booth's initiative came relatively late in the efforts by demographers from the late eighteenth century to monitor the fertility of the population in relation to birth and death rates, to monitor and curtail endemic diseases that sapped the strength of the population.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Foucault, 2004: 243).

¹⁰⁹⁷ Foucault, (2004: 245-246).

¹⁰⁹⁸ For more on the Booth map see <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/highlights>. This is considered the forerunner of modern geodemographic segmentation, pioneered by Richard Webber in Liverpool through ACORN whose successor MOSAIC is offered for sale by Experian.

Governing the Neoliberal Subject

As we have seen, for Foucault, if the question that liberalism posed to power was how best to govern free subjects then how did the government of these free subjects come into being and evolve? Given his sensitivity to context and to the dynamic nature of social relations and discourse, Foucault (2008) focused on the influence of political economy on biopolitics, dwelling particularly on the period following the Second World War. From this he concluded that the self-limitation of government since then has been primarily influenced by political economy and not the legal system of rights.¹⁰⁹⁹ In particular he summoned attention to the growing influence of the discourses of European ordoliberalism and American neoliberalism, each of which is highly critical of the State and inimical to State control, elevating individual freedom from State interference as the highest value. It was timely that he devoted the last three lectures of the series to the discussion of neoliberalism, just as this project was about to be realised following the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. His main argument was that this involved a radical shift in the conception of *homo economicus*, no longer envisaged as a partner in exchange, but rather as the manager of his or her own enterprise, whose aim is to maximise his human capital.

Foucault (2008) devoted the final three lectures of the series to discussion of the Chicago School economists, Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker. Becker, whose arguments are outlined and discussed in chapters four and five, laid much of the groundwork for the extension of market principles well beyond the traditional remit of economics. Foucault noted that there is much to admire about Becker's (1964) formulation of an individual subject who is as free as possible from coercion by the State,¹¹⁰⁰. Additionally, while the concept of human capital shares the same progressive aims as those that inform disciplinary power and biopolitics, in this new formulation, the onus shifts more firmly onto the individual who is charged to realise this goal. Being the manager of one's human capital is individualising, particularly for those who fail to meet the standard. Foucault also notes that Becker's analysis does not concern itself with the decisions of actual individuals, but rather operates at the level of statistical aggregation, based on the assumption that the overall market is rational and efficient even though individuals and households may not always be.¹¹⁰¹ This form of power does not work directly on the individual but rather takes the form of incentives (see Becker's work on marriage), leading Foucault to voice the concern that the form of power on which neoliberalism rests is based on behaviourism.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Foucault, (2008: 13).

¹¹⁰⁰ Foucault, (2008, seminars of 7th-28th March, 1979: 215-289.)

¹¹⁰¹ This might be regarded as an instance of the pot calling the kettle, as Foucault's own approach is closer to the view from a helicopter than to one based on the ground.

Foucault (2008) makes three broad points about Becker's ideas. Firstly, he wonders where the notion of continuous improvement of human capital might lead? Will individuals seek to maximize their reproductive potential by looking for partners who possess high human capital, or seek to ensure that potential partners carry no genetic risk to their offspring? While noting that this was not an issue at time of writing he worried that; "it is inevitable that the problem of the control, screening and improvement of the human capital of individuals, as a function of unions....will be called for", noting that the racist implications of such moves are to be feared.¹¹⁰² Secondly, Foucault notes the difference between Bentham, who had hoped that the Panopticon would entirely eradicate criminality and Becker's argument that some criminal conduct is invariably inelastic and so there is a point beyond which the costs of trying to address crime will simply outweigh the negligible benefits.

Thirdly, and most significantly, Foucault detects a paradox in the changing understanding of homo economicus from liberalism to neo-liberalism. The former holds that homo economicus should be *laissez-faire*, let go, and allowed to pursue his own self-interest, given that one cannot know the ways of the market. On the other hand, Becker integrates behaviourism with economics when he redefines and stretches the meaning of economic rationality to signify; "any conduct which responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment"... "which accepts reality". Thus, as opposed to the liberal individual who should be left to *laissez-faire*, Becker's neoliberal argument points towards an individual that is "eminently governable".¹¹⁰³ Through such a move Becker was able to argue that economic principles can usefully be applied to a broad range of social issues such as racial inequality, crime, addiction, education, the desire to have children and family welfare, all of which are subject to the inexorable logic of benefits and costs. Homo economicus, is thus transformed from being conceived of as a partner in exchange, to the manager of his or her human capital and producer of their own satisfaction.¹¹⁰⁴ Foucault noted, presciently, in light of the subsequent development and popularity of service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), that this notion of the consumer as producer of their own satisfaction, provides a "very useful theory of consumption".¹¹⁰⁵

Foucault was struck that from a moral perspective, Becker's argument does not judge the individual whose behaviour is framed purely in relation to a balance of incentives. The individual, for instance, someone addicted to drugs, is not subjected to moral judgement, or censure, nor are they subjected to a disciplinary regime. Instead, they are framed by an economic model that assumes that they will respond rationally to the incentives on offer.

¹¹⁰² Foucault, (2008: 228-229). 14th March, 1979.

¹¹⁰³ Foucault, (2008: 270). 28th March, 1979.

¹¹⁰⁴ Foucault, (2008: 225), 14th March, 1979.

¹¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 226.

As described by Foucault neoliberal theory as conceived of by the Chicago School paved the way for the realisation of a new domain or field, constituting a new logic of power that goes beyond the traditional understandings of homo economicus and of the subject of right.¹¹⁰⁶ Similar to its previous instantiation, this requires a subject who is free to make choices between alternatives and whose behaviour is governed with a light touch, aiming towards an emancipatory goal, that is arrived at by manipulating the range of choices available to the individual. Foucault argues that what is new here is that there is no moral judgement of the individual and that instead behaviour is viewed simply as a question of incentives; for instance, the criminal is assumed to be a rational economic actor who weighs up costs and benefits and is not tied to a pejorative identity. Foucault picks on Becker's assumption that all individuals are rational, which is based on aggregate patterns of market behaviour across a population. For Becker, while the individual may act irrationally, rationality will prevail at the aggregate level of the market. A consequence of the idea of human capital, once it takes root, is that the individual is, (in another unfortunate butchery of language), subjected to being "responsibilized" (Shamir, 2008).

While Becker's espoused intention was to promote welfare on a number of fronts, it is clear that in his explanation the husbandry of their capital is a matter for the individual to sort out. Foucault calls attention to some of the potential weaknesses of this by mentioning the role played by a person's genetic endowment in the formation of their human capital, which privileges some and is a handicap for others. He also worries about the pressure to seek out a spouse who will maximise one's human capital.¹¹⁰⁷

Foucault, Social Science and the Consumer

The translation of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), inspired American social theorists Sandra Bartky and Hilary Radner amongst others, to explore contemporary gym culture, a spatial arrangement that conforms closely to the disciplinary ideal described by Foucault. Bartky (1992) argued that while women were not forced to develop a fit body, they were disciplined to produce and maintain a 'properly feminine body' pleasing to men. In her view the considerable time and energy devoted by women to body maintenance was due to the simple fact that they were subordinate to men and so had to use their bodies to gain entry to the world of men and to compete with other women for men and for jobs. Moreover, if a woman refused to go along with social expectations of what constituted an acceptable appearance, she faced severe sanctions of being scorned, or shamed. Bartky acknowledged that body discipline could have a positive side, in that attention to diet and exercise could enhance feelings of empowerment, even though these activities moulded women's bodies to the ideal-image fored by men.

¹¹⁰⁶ Foucault, (2008: 295).

¹¹⁰⁷ Foucault, 2008: 227-228).

Radner contended that Bartky made too much of women's disempowerment, citing the 'workout' tapes produced by Jane Fonda, who in her view provided a role model for women who wanted to control their lives. Radner argued that the bodies of the models used by Fonda were different from the pencil-thin shapes usually propagated by the media and that the body produced by Fonda's workout tapes was neither erotic, nor designed to please men, but rather suitable for public life and for work. In this view "working out" did not render women passive and helpless but was rather purposeful, providing them with a sense of autonomy and the means to reconstruct themselves. Referring to Fonda's decision to have reconstructive surgery, Radner explained this as a logical extension of the Fonda workout, as an activity that was voluntarily engaged in because of the returns it provided in terms of status and even pleasure.

Zygmunt Bauman (1995) offered a different explanation for the rise of the culture of fitness, which for him was equally applicable to women and men. Bauman saw no need to bring Foucault to bear on this question, which he explained as a postmodern development that went beyond the modern focus on training and regimentation of the modern 'healthy' body. While the modern healthy body was a requirement for soldiers and workers, the shift to postmodernity called for the development of the 'fit' body. As an example of the modern concern with health, Bauman mentions the industrialist Joseph Rowntree who in the late nineteenth century devoted considerable effort to calculating the materials necessary to maintain the minimum standard of healthy living for his workers; for instance, he, excluded tea from his calculation, on the basis that it has no nutritional value (despite that at that time tea was seen to be an indispensable social drink). For Bauman, the opposite idea came to prevail in the postmodern era, when the body began to be framed through a multitude of discourses as a consuming body, such that the measure of its proper condition became the extent to which it could consume what the consumer society had to offer.¹¹⁰⁸ The fit body is a 'DIY' creation, which creates a strange and untenable position; 'S/he must be in control but s/he must be controlled'.¹¹⁰⁹

Governing the Consumer

The compendium put together by Miller and Rose (2008) includes empirical research conducted by the authors over the course of a decade. In the introduction the authors state their intention to study governmentality, wisely steering clear from attempting to form a general theory, and instead develop a set of conceptual tools to flesh out Foucault's sketch of this concept.¹¹¹⁰ They start by citing Foucault's pronouncement that governmentality concerns the conduct of conduct, that must be related to a specific issue or concern that is problematic for a group of agents. They note that in relation to marketing practice, the group that determines and addresses the problem is likely to be

¹¹⁰⁸ Bauman, (1995: 116).

¹¹⁰⁹ Bauman, (1995: 118).

¹¹¹⁰ (Miller & Rose, 2008: 14-21).

diverse, perhaps involving business executives, politicians, inhouse and external market researchers, media agencies, psychologists and architects. Miller and Rose separate rationalities from technologies of government. The plural rationalities, emphasizes that there is no one rationality at work in knowing and representing a particular problem. Once identified, problems come to be framed in a common language. Technologies are ways of acting upon a problem so as to transform it, for the obvious reason that if it is to be altered the conduct in question must be amenable to intervention by some form of rationalized technique.

The authors situate their discussion of specific issues within the context of neoliberalism, which foregrounds individual freedom over all else and so demands less top-down control and intervention by the state and more self-restraint on the part of the individual. They argue that the nub of neoliberalism is to provide a sufficiently strong State to defend its interests internationally and ensure internal order, while providing as much room as possible for the individual citizen and consumer to go about their daily business unfettered by State control. One of the central devices is the market and the State becomes involved in the development and proliferation of means to develop and sustain quasi markets (ibid.: 81). Markets are to replace planning and market principles are to be extended beyond the marketplace. Economic entrepreneurship is to replace regulation, as individuals acting in pursuit of their own interests are best placed to achieve these. Active entrepreneurship is to replace passive solidarity.¹¹¹¹

Miller and Rose distance their approach from a number of well-known radical critiques of advertising, including those by Vance Packard, Herbert Marcuse and Stuart Ewen. They contend that the problem of ‘making up the consumer’ was not a “brute attempt to impose desire upon a plastic undifferentiated mass but an intricate cartography...of the everyday life of consumption and its little pleasures and anxieties” (Miller & Rose, 2008: 120). While their rather superior and dismissive tone could have gone further to engage with the nuances of these works, they make the fair assertion that critiques often focus on marketing practice from the outside-in, rather than seeking to construct an understanding the complexities of the problems perceived by the marketer. Miller and Rose do not take the existence of the consumer as given, but rather seek to explore how the consumer is “made up” or “assembled” by marketing discourse. One of the strengths of their contribution is that they support their argument is based on extensive archival material pertaining the activities of psychologists working at the London based Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) from 1950 to 1970. Their extensive discussion of this in the context of neoliberalism is rather puzzling, as the period they focus on antedates the formation of the neoliberal consensus.¹¹¹² However, their central point is that a new form of governance emerged during this period, based on the application psychological

¹¹¹¹ Miller & Rose, 2008: 79-80).

¹¹¹² The Heath government elected in 1970 was influenced by neoliberal arguments. There is no mention whatever of the Chicago School nor of Schulz or Gary Becker. It seems reasonable to argue that neoliberalism did not come into its own until the 1980s.

knowledge that effectively “made up” different versions of the consumer coupled with related techniques to influence their behaviour.

The authors point to the irony that at the beginning of this period the ‘Tavi’ as it was known, which was once known for its emancipatory approach to alleviate psychological distress, shifted perspective to deploy its resources for some of the largest consumer business in the UK for a diverse range of products including ice-cream, biscuits, toilet-paper and beer. Their analysis suggests that from the perspective of the marketing practitioner, the process of constructing the consumer was not easy, as researchers had to figure out ways of marketing goods that were almost functionally identical. Rather than imposing false needs on the individual, the authors contend that the construction of the commodity evolved in relation to the understanding of the consumer, firstly by identifying the consumers’ real needs, then linking these to the product and the context of its use. They argue that these psychologists contributed to the development of new forms of marketing knowledge based on concepts such as the brand-image and the product lifecycle.

Miller and Rose contend that the research conducted by the Tavi was “exemplary” of the work involved in “assembling” the modern consumer, such that consumers’ desires were not just uncovered, but were “forced into existence” through the application of methods such as the focus group.¹¹¹³ Consumers were not treated as passive automatons but rather were conceived as “highly problematic entities” that became “thinkable by new techniques of calculation, classification and inscription”. The authors describe several different theoretical understandings of the consumer that were deployed by researchers at Tavi, depending on their individual preferences. For instance one group used focus groups to construct a psychoanalytic understanding that went well beyond the physical characteristics of the product, to delve into the often unconscious pleasures, fears and anxieties associated with the consumption of ice-cream and chocolate. Another group applied a social-psychological frame to explore the context hair-care and in particular, the meaning of home perms to women, which revealed the positive and negative attributes associated with the use of these products. A third group of researchers applied a form of rational choice theory on behalf of the Guinness brand, to understand male preferences for beer. The researchers who worked on this study criticised the assumption that all consumers use the same universal rationality, to argue instead that different personality types use different forms of rationality.¹¹¹⁴ Researchers also started to investigate brand loyalty, to discover the psychological cost of choosing between alternatives, how best to differentiate products and to explain why one product succeeds, while another fails. This led to the understanding that different consumers responded to the same product in consistently different ways, leading to the classification of consumers into demographic and psychographic segments.

¹¹¹³ Miller & Rose, (2008.: 139/140).

¹¹¹⁴ Miller & Rose (2008: 130).

As a coda, the authors briefly acknowledge that by comparison to the sophisticated programmes of research conducted at TIHR, “many of the efforts to understand consumers’ needs, wants, envies and anxieties” at the time were “cruder and more cynical than those we have described.” (ibid.140).

Scholarship in Marketing and Consumer Research

Unlike their colleagues in social theory and organization studies, marketing scholars were slow to apply insights from *Discipline and Punish* to their field.¹¹¹⁵ From their study of a service firm Skålen et al. (2009) concluded that disciplinary power, which is central to scientific marketing management, was mainly narrowly applied to front line sales workers. They refrain from discussing the various contexts in which consumers are disciplined, perhaps because there are so many that involve the logic of surveillance, discipline and shame. For instance, many of us “enjoy” the experience of air travel where the “normalised” passenger is disciplined to perform a series of tasks that would have bemused their predecessors, by providing details of the identities of all passengers in advance, checking in for the flight in advance, ensuring their baggage conforms strictly to the weight-limit specified by the carrier, loading their baggage onto the conveyor belt, paying extra if they wish to sit with family or friends, ensuring too arrive on time to pass through security prior to departure and ensuring that they enclose all liquids less than 100 grammes in a re-sealable plastic bag; and posing for facial recognition cameras at passport control. Those who fail to conform or perform to the requirement to act knowledgeably and quickly, are exposed to public ridicule and shame; like me you may have witnessed the frequent indignities inflicted on passengers of budget airlines, who in my experience are usually women.

Scholars have been inspired by Foucault to challenge received accounts of the historical development of marketing theory and to apply his ideas on biopolitics and governmentality to their field. Some papers extend discussion of themes of surveillance and control discussed in *Discipline and Punish* (1978). For instance, Chartiris et al. (2019) discuss how the circuits that link runners to their tracking devices and to other runners (and brand managers) through access to web portals gamify the experience for runners. One might argue for rather obvious reasons that they go too far in suggesting that this transforms running into a competitive and social activity, as perhaps it is more acceptable to contend that this technology acts to shape and steer the act of running to maximise use of the app, which “tames, captures and appropriates value from different aspects of consumers’ lives, including – and combining – their social behaviours, cognitive capacities and bodily conducts” (Charitsis, et al., 2019). Another paper is devoted to discussion of the brandscape (Wood and Ball, 2013).

¹¹¹⁵ See Raffnsøe et al., (2019), in relation to organization studies.

The following discussion is not intended to provide an exhaustive account, but rather draws selectively on examples to illustrate some of the different ways in which Foucault's ideas have been applied to the contexts of marketing and consumer research.

Revised Accounts of the History of Marketing Thought

The research conducted by Mark Tadajewski and his collaborators has been influenced by Foucault in two main ways. Firstly, they employ Foucault's genealogical approach to good effect by tracking down literature omitted from conventional accounts of the development of marketing thought to complexify and challenge the received wisdom. From their investigations they discovered that relationship marketing¹¹¹⁶ and Service Dominant Logic¹¹¹⁷, were not relatively recent irruptions in marketing thought, but have a much longer lineage. They also discovered an alternative formulation of a "Socialist Dominant Logic" motivated by the goal of, "increasing access to consumption and quality of life", that was subsequently excised from the record in conventional accounts.¹¹¹⁸

Tadajewski and his collaborators employ "hyper-power", a relatively obscure concept that so far as I can detect, appears once in Foucault's 1972-1973 lectures, never to be seen again. Tadajewski draws from Foucault to explain hyper-power as a, 'multiplied, accumulated power'¹¹¹⁹ that threads throughout society. Its function, 'is to connect up time, the body, the life of individuals, to the process of production and the mechanisms of hyper-profit'.¹¹²⁰ Although the above is typically sketchy, it makes sense to think of hyper-power as a species of pastoral power that is applied to the action of corporate entities, whose aim is to realize "hyper-profit" by achieving a monopoly position. Tadajewski, (2019), argues that the formation of habitual consumption has been neglected in discussions of the history of marketing thought. He explains that habit played an important role for Foucault in the realization of hyper-power, in relation to the need to inculcate good habits and suppress bad habits, so as to maximize the productive capacity of the economy. Tadajewski detects a related trend in the actions of marketers to inculcate habitual dependency in consumers, not only in the pursuit of profit, but ultimately, to free the business from the scourge of competition, to dominate the market. It is worth pointing out here that while habit may not have been discussed much in relation to the history of marketing thought, its importance has long been recognised in the consumer research literature, for instance in relation to the concept of involvement,

¹¹¹⁶ Tadajewski & Saren, (2009). Brown, (1998) made a similar point that relationship marketing was not a novel concept.

¹¹¹⁷ Tadajewski & Jones, (2021).

¹¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 21.

¹¹¹⁹ Foucault, (2015: 219)

¹¹²⁰ Foucault, (2015: 219, in Tadajewski, (2019).

which differentiates brand loyalty, as a more active form of habitual behaviour from inertia.¹¹²¹

Denegri-Knot and Tadajewski (2017) offer the “Napster” case as a further example of hyper-power.¹¹²² As with the World Wide Web, the base technology that led to the development of the MP3 player was designed in the University system in the mid-1980s and was thus funded by the public purse. The authors do not delve into origins of MP3 technology, nor into how this escaped through nefarious means, to arrive eventually onto the laptops of Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker who founded the business of Napster Inc., the peer-to-peer sharing platform they launched in 1999, which consolidated all of the songs shared by users into an easily accessible database. The massive business success of Napster quickly aroused concern in the music industry, leading to a lawsuit against Napster and the paper by Denegri-Knot and Tadajewski focuses on documents pertaining to this legal case.

The authors describe how three countervailing discourses were brought to bear in the course of the litigation which they label as digital communitarianism, digital libertarianism and market conservatism. They describe how ultimately, market conservatism won out over the others, whose arguments were either ignored or ruled out as inadmissible. They also mention that a key point arose when an expert argued that MP3s are not crude copies, but are identical to CDs, the implication being that they can therefore be considered as assets owned by those who made the CDs. Seen this way, file sharing is illegitimate, because users have not sought the permission of the owner. The authors conclude that the Napster case is an example of ‘hyper-power’ in action involving those acting for the industry, “supported by the weight of the legal community and precedent”, who used experts to define this new technology, “in a manner consistent with a capitalist convention and the legal status quo.” Denegri-Knot and Tadajewski go further to argue in relation to marketing theory, that their findings upset the widely promulgated claim by proponents of Service Dominant Logic, which holds that the customer is the co-creator of value. From their perspective, this fails to consider the question of power, particularly that of the law as a gatekeeper which undergirds how value is judged and effectively sanctions what is permissible, from what is not.

Hyper-power can thus be considered as a sub-species of pastoral power that is geared towards optimization, as a quest towards a secular ideal of “salvation” in this world that is achieved by improving the health and wealth of the population (Foucault, 1982: 783). This progressive emancipatory goal is consistent with Tadajewski’s (2019) description of businessmen in the early twentieth century such as Bernard McFadden and John Harvey Kellogg and the injunctions of periodicals such as the *Dietetic* and *Hygienic Gazette* that promoted self-management, exercise, diet and moderation, as ways to demonstrate the superiority of the national stock. While he maintains that such activities were geared

¹¹²¹ See for instance Assael, (1994).

¹¹²² A&M Records vs. Napster Inc.1999-2001.

towards achieving maximum utility for the government, financiers and employers, Tadjewski might have done more to highlight the overtly racist worldview that ultimately informed this line of thought.¹¹²³ Tadjewski, (2019) puts Foucault back to front when arguing that religious teachers, “encouraged self-formation consistent with the needs of capitalism” by instilling, “ideals of motivation, sobriety and discipline”; Foucault, (1982) argued the other way round, that modern institutions adopted what he calls pastoral power from Christian practice.

I had to think again about where to put the paper by Skålen et al. (2006), as its topic is ostensibly about governmentality, although it also seeks to problematize the received wisdom of the periodization of the history of marketing thought. On reflection, the paper sits best here. In contrast to Miller and Rose (2008), who resist the temptation to do so, Skålen et al. defer to the organization theorist Stewart Clegg, who defined governmentality as, ‘reflexive self-control, [creating] situation[s] in which external sources of surveillance become unnecessary’.¹¹²⁴ Their professed aim is to understand “what marketing seeks to govern, how marketing governs, and who we become when governed by marketing”? While this may seem overly ambitious, the authors principal aim is then stated as to challenge the received wisdom on the historical periodization of marketing. They do so by consulting historical accounts by managerialists, marketing historians and authors of influential textbooks.

Based on their analysis they argue that up until the 1930s, the “governmental project” of marketing discourse, which was primarily centred in the USA was not well defined. The second period from the 1930s onward focused more on the importance of the consumer and on the optimization and control of the sales process, such that, by the 1950s, customer orientation had become the dominant logic informing the sales process, with the rise to prominence of marketing management and the the marketing concept which was different from engineering and sales perspectives. The authors contend that the marketing concept, created a new form of subjectivity to that of other managerial discourses by producing the “customer knowing” subject. The more recent shift to services marketing led to a focus on optimizing the process of service delivery, such that all employees were exhorted to consider themselves as part-time marketers. As a consequence, “all organizational members are turned into objects of marketing management and control”. The authors contend that this was achieved by means of a paradoxical mix of standardization and flexibility. Standardization involved the monitoring and control of processes and activities through a variety of means such as customer satisfaction surveys. In a follow-up paper the authors argue that this resulted not in

¹¹²³ While Darwin himself partly contributed to this, the notions of competitive “fitness”, of “racial superiority”, “racial purity”, “racial pollution” and ‘racial conflict’ associated with “social Darwinism”, which constituted the cultural worldview of the West at the time, were legitimised as having a scientific basis by Darwin’s cousin Herbert Spencer, who was also a firm believer in individualism and laissez-faire government (see Dennis, 1995).

¹¹²⁴ Clegg, Pitsis, Rura-Polley, & Marosszeky, (2002: 318).

excellence, but normalization. However, because standardization can also detract from an employee's ability to serve customer needs, control technologies are not designed to shape employee behaviour in detail but to allow limited scope for freedom of action. In the service marketing mode the employee becomes the "customer determined subject" who has internalized the service culture which frames her actions.

Consumer "Responsibilization"

One didn't need to be Foucault around the time of the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 to detect that individual responsibility was a key part of their agenda, for they proclaimed it from the rooftops. This mantra was proclaimed from the start and has since been repeated time and again while discussion of structural factors has virtually vanished. The poor and indigent were firmly told that it was their responsibility to "pull themselves up by their bootlaces" and those made unemployed in 1981, were advised by Secretary of State for Employment Norman Tebbit, to "get on your bike", while fast-forwarding to 2023, Works and Pensions Secretary Mel Stride helpfully informed "economically inactive" older workers that jobs were available at Deliveroo!¹¹²⁵ The absurd Kafkaesque plight of the individual subjected to such ideas is well-described by Ken Loach, in *I Daniel Blake* (2016).

Pertaining to consumer responsibility, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) explored the creation of four forms of consumer subjectivity in the discourse of the World Economic Forum. They slickly package their argument through the acronym P.A.C.T. (thereby inflicting English with even more "izations"), to argue that three processes are involved in transforming irresponsible consumers to a more enlightened being. Personalization pins the solution to the problem in the personage of individual agent whom others decide needs to be enlightened; authorisation acts to legitimate this subject position, while capabilization centres around the question of how to design products that will help achieve this state of enlightened self-management. The authors discuss how these processes were applied in WEF fora to those who were deemed poor and indigent, feckless, careless of their own wellbeing, or indifferent to the environment. Their report of the WEF discussion of the financially literate subject is jaw-dropping in light of the well-known egregious behaviour of the financial services industry in precipitating the sub-prime crash that triggered the Great Financial Crash (GFC) resulting in the near-meltdown of the world financial system in 2007- 2008. While it is true that poor financial literacy of buyers played a role in this, this was also true of those running some of the top financial institutions, whose products were so complex they couldn't understand them themselves!¹¹²⁶ Thus, to learn that rather than calling for more regulation and better consumer protection, Klaus Schwab, head of the WEF, shifted discussion away from the system and entirely onto the back of the individual consumer, who was exhorted to

¹¹²⁵ Elledge, John, (2023). The absurdity of the Tories "get on your bike" plea. *The New Statesman*, 5th August.

¹¹²⁶ See for example, Peñaloza, & Barnhart, (2011) and Lenzer, Robert, (2012). The 2008 meltdown and where the blame falls. *Forbes*, 2nd June.

become a “good capitalist”, seemed outrageous! There are interesting resonances between the WEF discussions of “good stewardship” and the analogy drawn by Margaret Thatcher’s between management of the economy and that of the prudent housewife managing the family finances.¹¹²⁷

How useful is the P.A.C.T. framework? While it has certainly captured the imagination of a number of consumer researchers, I was drawn back to the case of Sammy, that was discussed in chapters four and five. Someone, somewhere must have thought it a good idea to enable Sammy, who is severely learning-disabled, to be judged responsible and give him control over his own budget, which he spends on ice-cream and mobile-phones, to the frequent exasperation of his carers. In relation to capabilization, Sammy has little prospect of attaining the requisite literacy to enable him to make informed decisions and so there is little prospect of any transformation in his condition.

P.A.C.T. has been popular with those who investigate the supposedly socially responsible consumer. It should be clarified that the discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) differs from the “Chicago” form of neoliberalism espoused by Milton Friedman and others. As mentioned in chapters passim, Friedman argued that the one and only role of business is to make a profit, while proponents have CSR make the contrary argument that business should have wider social goals.¹¹²⁸ The paper by Caruana and Chatzidakis. (2014) opened the theoretical door to explorations of how consumer power is mobilized by others as a resource for CSR, which has since been followed by empirical papers on topics such as, how consumers deal with being asked how much to pay for food in a café (Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019), how they respond to calls to manage waste (Cherrier & Türe, 2022) and in response to an advertisement to eat more chicken and less meat (Döbbbe & Cederberg, 2023).

Consumer Resistance

In his observation of how the poor openly celebrated as a mark of their distinction, the glutinous cheap foods that the middle-classes scorned and the “champion chompers” who fed Foucault (1982: 780) suggests that when it comes to questions of power, resistance is the place to start one’s investigation, as this acts as a ‘chemical catalyst’ to reveal power relations, which can be investigated “through the antagonism of strategies followed”. For instance, to find out more about sanity, enquire into insanity and the power of psychiatry over the mentally ill. Foucault continues that such struggles are not abstract, based for instance on the drive for profits made by medical companies, but immediate, apparent in the concrete situation of the medic who is right in front of you, who has direct control over your body. This seems obvious when it comes to the power of the medic to identify an individual pejoratively, for instance, by labelling them as psychotic or as suffering from dementia. Nowadays authors tend to blame social media for a noted rise in mental suffering, particularly amongst the young (Haidt, 2024). While

¹¹²⁷ See for example, Barnes and Hicks (2022).

¹¹²⁸ Source: Wood, (1991).

there seems little doubt of the deleterious effects of these technologies on attention, self-esteem and anxiety, this also has the effect of increasing the power of therapists and of the wellness and pharmaceutical industries who also have a stake in this. It is also noteworthy too that there are situations where being labelled as ADHD or dyslexic is not necessarily deleterious for the individual concerned. There is some evidence that rather than being used to label individuals as abnormal so as to sequester them, diagnoses of “disorders” such as ADHD and dyslexia can actually offer these individuals a leg-up, as these diagnoses are sought by concerned middle-class parents as means to secure competitive advantage over their peers.¹¹²⁹

Foucault argues that there are three forms of struggle; against forms of domination based on ethnic, social and religious differences; against forms of exploitation that separate individuals from what they produce; and that, “which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way”.¹¹³⁰ As I see it, the first invites us to explore the operations of power with respect to class and religion and the second appears close to Marx’s arguments about alienation and fetishism. That said, much of the subsequent research inspired by Foucault has focused on explorations of subjectivity. In Berlant’s (2007) discussion of obesity, informed by Foucault’s account of biopolitics, she does not start with resistance but rather launches straight into her argument that obesity in the USA is a form of “slow death” suffered by the “economically crunched”, comprising those class fractions deemed superfluous to requirements, condemned to life in trailer parks or low-income housing. She puts it that while biopolitics is enrolled to maximise the productive health of the population, it is also concerned to eliminate everything that is a threat to this, “from bacteria to people”. Berlant acknowledges the complexity of this situation which began with past government decisions to focus on the production of cheap food for the poor, resulting ultimately in the development of tasty ultra-processed food (UPF) “that was ultimately to poison them”; extended to local zoning decisions made in favour of fast-food outlets in poor neighbourhoods; to the harried life-styles of waged labourers who as a result eat “on the fly”; and the infiltration of cash-strapped schools and colleges by UPF brands. She describes the situation as even more complex, given the involvement of the insurance industry, public health departments, corporate, government information campaigns, proposed legislation and the media, not to mention the pernicious marketing and PR campaigns engaged in by the industry.¹¹³¹

While offering considerable insight into the issue, a potential problem with Berlant’s (2007) discussion of obesity is that it is top-down and so does not discuss the various strategies used by the parties involved. Perhaps one of the difficulties in doing so is because questions of weight and obesity are so individualised, which can seem strange, given that these issues lie at the intersection of the massive food, health and wellness industries.

¹¹²⁹ University of Oxford, (2015). *Imbalance of ADHD in the US*. Department of Psychiatry. 23rd Nov. <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/news/imbalance-of-adhd-diagnosis-in-the-us>. See Kirby (2020) for discussion of dyslexia.

¹¹³⁰ Ibid. (781).

¹¹³¹ See Moodie et al., (2021) as an instance.

Weight control is portrayed as a personal struggle and despite evidence to the contrary, obesity is often cast as a form of moral failure.

What then would resistance look like when it comes to obesity? It is hard to imagine any space that is free from the machinations of the diet industry or the wellness industry or indeed of supposedly independent nutrition which in any event are tied up with the Big Food.¹¹³² There are of course many informed pundits on mainstream and social media with advice on “healthy eating” and exercise regimes. There are those too who simply resist the stigma attached to the label of being labelled fat, involved in “fat-acceptance”, or fat-rights” groups, who direct their ire against the “holier than thou” approach of advocates of healthy eating, rather than against the industry that fuels their predicament. Perhaps in such circumstances where people resist resistance, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) explanation of *amor fati*, (the love of one’s fate) can help. From his empirical work in France, Bourdieu noticed how those stigmatized can actively celebrate their stigma, based on them. In this context it is interesting that the last large-scale boycott of the sugar industry in Britain happened in the eighteenth century, but then the target in that instance was not calories but the slavery involved in sugar production.

Where empirical research is concerned it makes good sense to focus on a well-defined area. Since his death Foucault’s writing has itself fed into an increasing general awareness of struggles against categorization and individualization and has influenced movements that proclaim the individual’s right to be different. There are traces of these elements in Gurney (1999), whose discussion of UK discourse on home ownership might be seen as a relatively early example of the objective formation of subjectivity involved in the construction of consumer “responsibilization”. Gurney describes how private housing was marketed as “owning your own home”, in contrast to rental property which was described impersonally as “housing”. Owning one’s “home” was privileged, as the idea of “home” indexes nature and biology through tropes such as “nest-building and additionally, ownership sets the individual as a responsible citizen against the renter, who is labelled as a potential scrounger. Gurney discusses the process of normalisation of the individual mortgage applicant which at the time involved categorisation as either “quality” or “high-risk”, based on; “an examination of earnings, marital status, sexuality, health and indebtedness” (1999: 53). Gurney’s paper is centrally about resistance given that the subject he describes was based on his own experience as an applicant who was refused a mortgage because he was gay and so judged by actuaries as constituting a higher risk, apparently because of the chance he might contract AIDS. Thus, drawing from his own experience trying to resist his categorization, Gurney was able to trace some of the impersonal operations of the system by which he came to be objectified as an irresponsible consumer. Much has changed since Gurney wrote his piece and indeed renters now demand similar information from their tenants. Gurney’s paper can help one understand Foucault’s argument that resistance often involves struggles against

¹¹³² Carriedo et al. (2022) discuss how the nutrition profession in the USA has been captured by Big Food.

“privileged knowledge’ and ‘secrecy’, representing struggles against the question “who are we?”¹¹³³

Döbbe & Cederberg (2023) investigate consumer reactions to a corporate attempt to shape their responsibility in relation to the marketing campaign, “Do something simple for the climate”, by the Swedish poultry producer Kronfågel. A strapline for the campaign reads, “If everyone who reads this chooses chicken instead of beef only once, it’s like compensating for 14 long-haul jumbo jet flights.” Taking on board Foucault’s argument that where there is resistance there is power (for example in Foucault, 1982) the authors were interested to identify instances of counter-conduct where individuals resist or to evade being made responsible and identified four forms of counter-conduct, ranging from presenting challenges to the truth claims made in the campaign to the formation of a community to press their case.

Such instances returned me to think of the concern I had when reading Foucault’s statement that one should focus on what is immediate rather than on abstract struggles, based for instance, on the drive for profits made by medical companies. His call to focus on the immediate experience of those involved is understandable, given his awareness of the proclivity of armchair theorists to apply rote explanations to situations they have no direct experience of. But does this rule out all forms of abstract engagement? Foucault’s mention of medical profits summoned for me the image of the Purdue Pharmaceutical Corporation owned by the Sackler family, whose joint fortunes were made on the backs of millions of individuals who became hooked on Oxycontin and the many thousands who died prematurely. As with obesity, so the Opioid crisis hits the poorest hardest. Of those dying from Opioid addiction in the USA, seven out of ten are rural males who are less educated and unemployed.¹¹³⁴ While the effects of obesity on mortality are huge, the Opioid crisis is also a significant contributor.¹¹³⁵ The roots of the Opioid epidemic are simpler to trace, centring mainly on the actions of Purdue Pharma and its owners, the Sackler family, their sales agents and the medics they managed to corrupt. In relation to resistance, a pertinent question might be to ask whether and how, those addicted to Opioids resist the organizations they depend on for their fix?

Foucault and Dimensional Theories of Power

At the start of this chapter, I mentioned that Foucault developed a unique explanation that paid no heed to dimensional theories of power offered by Americans such as Dahl and others. His conception of power differs from A/b accounts in several ways. For Foucault the concept of sovereign power is outdated as there is no one centre of power (A) which

¹¹³³ Foucault, (1982: 781).

¹¹³⁴ Judd et al. (2023).

¹¹³⁵ The scale of deaths recorded in North America from opioid abuse is large, accounting for an estimated 600,000 deaths in the USA and Canada over the past two decades and forecast to kill 1.2 million by 2029 (Editorial, *The Lancet*, 2022). However, obesity has an even larger effect as in 1999 it was estimated that 280,000 Americans died from obesity-related causes annually, (Allison et al., 1999), rising to 500,000 per annum in 2022 (Ward et al., 2022).

represses another (b). Rather, power works through discourse to construct the very identities of 'A's' and 'B's'. Language, or discourse, is not neutral but is shaped by and reflective of, power. Medical discourse is not neutral but constructs and essentializes the 'normal healthy' body against which to frame those of deviants. Discourse can act in both ways, in transmitting power, but also in undermining and exposing it. For example, Foucault argues that the creation of a whole series of discourses which labelled the species of 'homosexuality' enabled not only the creation of a series of social controls, but of a 'reverse discourse' which used the same vocabulary and categories to argue that it was 'natural'. To sum up his theory of power:

- Power is not something that is acquired seized or shared, it cannot be held.
- Power is closely related to knowledge.
- Relations of power are not outside of other relations. The identities which comprise 'A' and 'B' are themselves artefacts of power.
- Where there is power there is resistance; but resistance is not outside power.¹¹³⁶
- Power comes from below; it is not something which is exerted by 'A' who is 'above' B.
- Power is intentional and rational to the extent that it has an aim and objective, but it should not be thought of as the creation of an individual agent, nor of a grouping such as the state.

Starting from the 'bottom-up' in this way, Foucault was able to conclude, in opposition to Elias and many others, that the idea of sexual repression is largely a myth. Rather than repressing sexuality, the bourgeoisie class in distinguishing itself in relation to the nobility began progressively to open itself up to the scrutiny of a range of experts who would ensure the vigour and good health of this class. The resultant examination of the bourgeois family achieved several results. First it fixed what had previously been scattered and indeterminate (sexuality) into a set of diverse sexual identities. This in turn led to the development of a set of discourses which aimed to improve the social body through the close supervision and maintenance of real bodies.

Lukes' Critique of Foucault

Although Lukes (1974) critique of Foucault is also discussed in chapter eight, given this chapter is intended also to be read as a standalone piece, I also discuss it here. One wonders what Lukes must have felt when he first read *Discipline and Punish*; What a nightmare! Whilst to begin with Lukes was dismissive of Foucault's, as is mentioned in the last chapter he is somewhat more generous to him in this latest edition of PRV (Lukes, 2021), where he acknowledges that Foucault's originality led him to refine his own ideas on power. Lukes now sees power not as the exercise of a capacity, but simply as a capacity, "because power may never, and does not need to be exercised, 'and you can be powerful by satisfying and advancing others' interests". This led Lukes to revise his original conception of power as domination, which he now understands to be insufficient, being too narrow, by limiting power to binary relations between actors who are assumed to have unitary interests. Lukes appreciates complexity involved in the existence of

¹¹³⁶ Source: Based upon Foucault, 1978: 93/4

multiple and conflicting interests. He also acknowledges the validity of Foucault's approach to understand the mechanisms by which compliance to domination is secured by linking power to knowledge through the shaping impact of expert knowledge claims and by highlighting the microphysics of power, which insinuates itself "into the very grain of individuals', reaching into the body and acting to shape their actions, behaviour, discourses and learning processes."¹¹³⁷

On the downside, Lukes criticizes what he sees as Foucault's overriding and "very broad" concern, to understand structural relations, institutions, strategies and techniques rather than concrete policies and the actual people.¹¹³⁸ Moreover he detects a related idealism inherent in Foucault's argument, which is not about how power actually works but which rather focuses on how it is *meant* to work; "Foucault was not examining actual disciplinary practices but their *design*".¹¹³⁹ However, what Lukes finds most troubling about Foucault, is his concern with Nietzschean rhetoric that leads him to assert that each way of life imposes its own regime of truth and politics as to what counts as acceptable discourse. In this view power is all encompassing and all-pervasive with no space for "primal liberty" outside of power. It is on this basis that Foucault has been said to have undermined the basis of the rational, autonomous moral agent, for in his account there can be no individual who exists outside and independently of its effects¹¹⁴⁰. The stakes are high because if Foucault is correct, then we must abandon the emancipatory ideal of a society where individuals are free from the negative effects of power and related to this, that power can be based on the rational consent of those who subject themselves to it. Not only is there nothing outside of power, there is no way of judging between different ways of life, since each imposes its own regime of truth, the types of discourse it accepts and makes true and how one distinguishes what is true from what is false. As Lukes sees it the trajectory of Foucault's project over his lifetime tilts progressively from a focus on repression towards production, noting also that the claim that power is productive has been, "wildly overstated and exaggerated" in numerous subsequent studies. He argues that in its 'non-overstated and non-exaggerated form", this simply reflects the notion that, if power is to be effective, then those subject to it must be rendered susceptible to its effects; repression says "no", whereas production makes up subjects, moulding souls by normalizing subjects.¹¹⁴¹ The emphasis in *Discipline and Punish* is on the 'carceral society', where those who are 'produced' as subjects are constrained and moulded into docile bodies. In contrast, the later 'phenomenologically richer' work on sexuality explains that those who cast off sexual inhibitions may imagine themselves to be free, which is an illusory freedom, given that the subject is controlled by

¹¹³⁷ Lukes, (2021: 93 & 95).

¹¹³⁸ This argument is informed by Garland (1992).

¹¹³⁹ Lukes, (2021: 98).

¹¹⁴⁰ Ibid.:97.

¹¹⁴¹ Ibid.: 95/96. The notion of "making up people" was advanced by Ian Hacking, (1986).

economic exploitation, “from suntan products to pornographic films” (this quote from Foucault, 1980). Lukes quotes Amy Allen¹¹⁴² who pointed out that while Foucault has a lot to say about the conceptual necessity of resistance, that he himself did not bother to discuss the actual strategies employed by those deemed mad, delinquent, perverted or hysterical, “to modify or contest the disciplinary or bio-power exercised over them”.¹¹⁴³

Lukes suggests that Foucault’s response to criticism was to strike a more voluntaristic tone in his later work on governmentality and in *The Subject and Power* (1982) where he states that power is ‘exercised over free subjects to the extent that they are free’. Lukes’ summary of governmentality, which argues that this consists of four layers, is as good as any and better than most, as he attends to the complexities in Foucault’s account. Governmentality pertains firstly to, ‘rationalities of rule’, which are styles of reasoning embodied in governing practices; secondly to conceptions of the person that these rationalities seek to inculcate such as the enterprising subject or the consumer; thirdly, the ‘technologies of the self’ deployed by individuals as they follow their respective interests, and work on themselves to develop virtuous habits and to fashion their characters; and fourthly, the ways in which these elements are aligned with one another. Quoting Foucault (1987: 19) who said, “I am aiming at the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other”, Lukes concludes that this version of ‘making up people’ is supposed to preserve their freedom, indeed to exhibit governing through freedom.

Lukes asks finally how one is to understand power today in relation to the subject? He quotes from Foucault that, “(t)he subject constitutes himself in an active fashion by the practices of the self. These are not invented by the subject but are patterns found in culture which are proposed, suggested and imposed”.¹¹⁴⁴ For Lukes it is at this point that Foucault’s earlier ultra-radicalism “dissolves”, as he is here, “simply restating some elementary sociological commonplaces...that individuals are socialized: they are oriented to roles and practices that are culturally and socially given; they internalize these and may experience them as freely chosen.”¹¹⁴⁵ What is distinctively Foucauldian, is the insight that these socialization practices can be seen as forms of “government” that are outside the purview of the state that involve a panoply of different agencies which “propose, suggest and impose” roles and practices deemed appropriate upon individuals who in turn must interpret their requirements and will sometimes resist and sometimes reject them. The key issue for Lukes, is the need to develop criteria to decide where power amounts to domination and to distinguish between dominating power and non-

¹¹⁴² Allen, (1998: 54), in Lukes, (2021, 100-101).

¹¹⁴³ Lukes, (2021, 101).

¹¹⁴⁴ Foucault, 1987: 11, in Lukes, (2021: 101-102).

¹¹⁴⁵ Lukes, (2021: 102).

dominating power and dependency, “and, not surprisingly, the ‘Final Foucault’ reaches for just such a distinction”.¹¹⁴⁶

Discussion and Conclusion

From the above it is clear that Foucault’s ideas did not stand still but evolved as a process, from earlier work which focused on dividing practices and confinement, to disciplinary regimes and latterly on how individuals came to be subjectified in a diverse array of settings, as sexual subjects in the ancient, early Christian and early modern worlds and as economic subjects in the emergent neoliberal society.¹¹⁴⁷ While his earliest translated work produced a number of insights into how disciplinary mechanisms are embedded into consumption contexts, interest has since moved to consider the construction of the consumer in different contexts, of consumer “responsibilization” and the struggles against it, leading also to fuller and more nuanced accounts of the history of marketing thought.

One of Foucault’s main contributions was to differentiate disciplinary power from sovereign power and how these too have changed since the development of biopolitics. Sovereign power calls for punishment, disciplinary power calls for surveillance and correction, whereas within the apparatus of security, theft becomes one of a series of probable events. While discipline continues to work through individuals in consumption contexts, from airport security queues to shopping, there are areas where it seems to have little effect. For instance, even though video surveillance is ubiquitous, “low-level” crimes such as shoplifting, vandalism and car-theft continue to plague local neighbourhoods. Cost-benefit analysis and the statistical bell-curve rule, as Foucault (2004) reminds us, the relevant questions are, “what is the average rate of criminality?” And “how much does it cost society?”

While the Panopticon provided a captivating, if flawed, image of ideal control, its equivalent today is the bombardment of the individual by the Cookie. Cookies occupy a strange zone between consciousness and the unconscious. On the one hand they are overt, as demonstrated by our need to accept them every time we visit a website. On the other hand, we seem blind to their effects. This seems a rather strange reversal of the myth of Gyges, described by Plato in *The Republic*, who could do all manner of unspeakable things to others because he was invisible – for now we – who can play the role of Gyges and yet be one of Gyges’ victims – are openly aware that he is prowling there somewhere in the background on social media, but don’t seem to care.

The effect of discourse in “making up subjects” is a potent idea associated with Foucault. When Francois Ewald told Gary Becker about Foucault’s concern that Becker’s theory was a fiction, Becker replied by saying that all theories are by nature simplifications and fictions but what matters is that they explain and predict behaviour. What I think Foucault is getting at is that Becker’s fictional subject is not confined to the academy but has

¹¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 103.

¹¹⁴⁷ See for instance, Garland, (2014: 365).

spilled out into the real world where real people are treated as *if* this were so, such that no matter what their level of competence the individual is assumed to be capable of managing choice. Miller and Rose describe the rupture between the political consensus that held from the end of World War Two to the 1980s, where citizenship focused on values of solidarity, contentment, welfare and security, and the enterprise economy which succeeded it, based on active citizenship based on individual freedom, personal choice and self-fulfilment. The vocabulary of enterprise provided reshaped the worker from being a social being who acted in solidarity with others to achieve security and welfare for all, to being the manager of their own social capital and so responsible for the level of return generated on this. Nowadays “enterprise” and “choice” have penetrated down to every crumpled niche of society, forming new relations between the exercise of choice in the market and consumption in domains that were long perceived as being beyond the market.

Questions have been asked as to the extent to which Foucault endorsed neoliberalism. Ewald, (in Harcourt et al., 2012) claims that Foucault was attracted by the lack of moral judgement in Gary Becker’s explanations which offer the prospect to promote new forms of liberty that might be free of subjection by sovereignty or discipline imposed by moral and legal prescriptions. Foucault was certainly no fan of marxism, especially those ideologues who owed unquestioning obedience to Soviet ideology. One critic argues that Foucault bought in too neoliberalism for constructing a “a society in which there is an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated”.¹¹⁴⁸ The critic adds that in doing so Foucault “directs our attention primarily to its ideological elements, which he valorizes as a purportedly different way of thinking politics, and not to its imperialist and colonial character as a global project of super exploitation and intensified repression”.¹¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, because the statistical methods of biopolitics allow for the efficient management of a population, liberty should not be considered unambiguously good. For Newheiser (2016), the techniques used to calculate the certainties generated by statistical normalization are profound for the individual.

Foucault’s discussion of discourse summons attention to the framing effects of language. Consider for instance the difference between referring to “climate change” as opposed to “climate crisis” and to “global warming” rather than “global heating”. Foucault has also done some harm to language, for instance, by coining the neologism “governmentality”, for which he had the grace to apologize. Unfortunately he seems to have encouraged others to try to outdo him leading to linguistic excrescences such as “responsibilization”, “capabilization” and “bioanatomopolitics”, that should have been strangled at birth.

Some of the concerns Foucault mentions in relation to inherited human capital are more pressing today than they were in the 1980s. There are pressures on individuals to enhance their human capital through human germline engineering, which enables the

¹¹⁴⁸ Foucault, (2008: 259-260).

¹¹⁴⁹ Rockhill, G., (2020). Foucault; the faux radical. The Philosophical Salon, 12th Oct. [https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/foucault-the-faux-radical/#:~:text=By the late 1970s and,me about Marx any more. See also Zamora, \(2019\) and Zamora, & Behrent \(2016\).](https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/foucault-the-faux-radical/#:~:text=By the late 1970s and,me about Marx any more. See also Zamora, (2019) and Zamora, & Behrent (2016).)

genome of an individual to be edited in such a way that the change is heritable. The potential dangers of engaging in such processes remain unknown, as are those of Neuralink, which has so far proved to be relatively benign.

De Certeau offers a simple analogy by which to illustrate the limits of even major thinkers like Foucault, asking us to imagine that the world of practice is like a sheet of rolled pastry and that each theory is a cookie cutter. Each theoretician will cut out a section that enables us to understand something of the whole, but they will also leave something behind. Foucault's cookie-cutter is largely concerned with how discourse shapes subjectivity and specifically the imposition of, and resistance to identities that come from outside, from the developing fields of medicine and psychiatry that are also linked to the law. These derive from the development of a *dispositif*, a symbolic classificatory system that is linked to professionals in psychology, psychiatry and the law, devising manuals such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and applying criteria to identify and label individuals. Today, a quite different state of affairs seems to have arisen, despite the continuing growth in power of the medical, legal and psychiatric professions to categorize and label the individual. Now the individual will confidently label themselves, claiming that they (and only they) have the self-knowledge to self-identify the "real me". For Foucault as for Lacan, the idea that one can "really" know who the "real" me is, is illusory and is itself an effect of the operations of power. But then this highlights another aspect of Foucault's cookie-cutter, which is that his is a purely cultural explanation that is totally lacking the physicality of the embodied self, of skin and bone, and guts and blood and phlegm, never mind the messy interactions involving genes, neurotransmitters, senses, emotions, hormones and cortex constituting all those things that operate "beneath the bonnet", as it were. There is so much that remains to be known.

It is rather obvious but still important to note that Foucault does not discuss conventional theories of power, although Lukes suggests that in his final years his explanation came closer to these. Lukes makes an important point in relation to Foucault's idealism, that the latter seems to assume that discourse will be realized, so he pays scant attention to what happens in practice. Added to this he tends to focus strictly on just one discourse. For example Foucault, (2008) describes the similarities and differences of the ordoliberal and neoliberal in some detail, while downplaying the role of the State and the juridical system. This focus is understandable, given that his aim is to trace the origins of the new form of governmentality that fully emerged fully fledged in the 1980s. However, he consequently omits to discuss the influence of the jurist Robert Bork, who played a huge role in creating the conditions for the rise of the mega-corporations we live with today. Additionally, while describing the framing of the individual in neoliberal discourse as "entrepreneur of the self" and noting the paradoxical relation whereby the free consumer is subject to behaviourist conditioning, he has precious little else to say about business or marketing.

Marketing scholars have since drawn upon Foucault to re-enquire into a range of issues and in particular it is good to see the emergence of empirical studies. However in this last section I would like to revisit Tadjewski (2019), whom I think makes a good point about

the role of habit in marketing. As discussed above, Foucault was well aware of the paradox by which the free consumer who is left to *laissez-faire*, is also open to behaviour modification. While the very mention of behaviourism can send a chill down the spine of the liberal social scientist by invoking the spectre of manipulation of the masses by an elite, it would be interesting to know what is actually involved in this form of governmentality? The following paragraph provides a very brief foray into an area that ought to be explored further.

Many of the incentives argued for by Gary Becker in relation to State intervention might be regarded with little consternation by the famed man on the Clapham omnibus. For instance, amongst other things Becker advocated economic incentives to reduce racism in the workplace (Becker & Landes, 1974), the use of financial gifts from parents to badly-behaved children to encourage them to be better behaved (Becker, 1974b) and for provision of continuing education and well-paid jobs to prevent individuals turning to crime (Becker, 1974). The aim of the more recent development of Nudge Economics, described by Richard Thaler (2015: 329) paradoxically as “libertarian paternalism”, is to frame the decision context in ways that “help people achieve their own goals”, for example, to increase the level of organ donations, reduce teenage pregnancies and increase the level of savings for retirement.

The aims of these government sponsored programmes seem benign when compared to the activities of the gambling industry, food producers and social media giants, amongst others, which target the poor and vulnerable in society with a range of perverse incentives. For example, the social media industry targets human attention as the key to profitability, with the aim for each organisation to achieve 100%. Corporations compete to feed the users of their platforms ratcheting up a series of perverse incentives geared to stoke base emotions of envy, pride, jealousy, lust, fear and anxiety; for example, a young girl who searches for tips on how to stay thin can then be bombarded with “recommendations” promoting bulimia and anorexia. From this one might hypothesize that the ability of these industries to grow fat on the misery of their customers is based on the increasing capture of government by corporate interests, resulting in a lack of regulation and control. In an earlier chapter, I described how this form of “governmentality” was facilitated by the acceptance by the US Supreme Court of the neoliberal argument presented by Robert Bork, that efficiency is the most efficient criterion by which to judge a monopoly, resulting in the giant corporations we see today.

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