

CRITICAL MARKET STUDIES: a proposal for politically engaged expansion of marketing themes

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1. Introduction

The issue of global, social inequalities and all their consequences has been a constant theme in the discussion of public organizations and civil society, which provides the expansion of organized social movements that fight for justice. It is important to realize that the tensions caused by these inequalities contribute to bringing about changes that can be seen in different ways and intensities in the various spheres of social life and, as could not be otherwise, also in private organizations.

In the organizational context, in addition to these findings, it is possible to verify a reproduction of a mercantile rhetoric that basically supports profitability, profit maximization and the reduction of production costs, in some cases by means of approaches and choices made without careful consideration of their consequences. This rhetoric also depicts the continuing effort of neoliberal thinking to naturalize and simplify the market, neutralizing its ethical-political effects (Rodrigues and Santos, 2011). In a system of intense competition, organizations are compelled to provide maximum returns to their shareholders and this can distort their decisions. Although these organizations always seek to emphasize the positive side, considering their failures as exceptions and not an integral part of their practices, what is frequently noticed is that unethical and antisocial postures, accidents, failures and even crimes are committed in seeking their objectives. These are detrimental to consumers, workers, the environment, communities, the market and society. That is, a context marked by contradictions that lead to constant clashes and ideological confrontations.

In marketing, it is broadly accepted that the discipline aligns with a concept that is both managerial and reductionist, which sees the market as highly passive. That is, limited to reacting to the appeals, strategies and movements developed by those responsible for the marketing of the organizations. In this dynamic, these professionals take on a central role in conducting the exchange relationships between sellers and consumers, and are responsible for managing the relationships with their clients. In this context, it is interesting to note that the marketing function has taken on an essentially managerial bias, concerned only with brokering relationships between consumers and businesses. This leads to the idea that “the concepts of macroeconomic principles seem to have disappeared from the marketing books, which define markets simply as a collection of buyers” (Araujo, Finch and Kjellberg, 2010, p. 2). Another finding is that most studies focus on market economics and even marketing systems, but disregard any discussion of their externalities. From this perspective, marketing systems are frequently seen as a “natural creation”, that is, something that is there, and it is not possible to see other options or (re)configurations into which they can fit. It is a common belief in the marketing field that markets grow and evolve “naturally”. However, this growth may have connotations that are not always justified. The expansion of a market may be accompanied by a number of problems including discrimination, abuse, exploitation and others.

It is worth mentioning that it is possible to find recent studies that have presented debates and interesting findings that contribute to the discussion and development of a theoretical framework that challenges this myopic view of markets. One field that makes significant contributions to this discussion is Economic Sociology, which considers markets as complex and dynamic institutions made up of agents with different roles who assign different meanings to exchange and have different motivations for acting. Furthermore, these agents interfere, reshape, redefine, upset, destabilize and change market properties (Araujo, 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007; Araujo *et al.*, 2010). Markets can still be built based on their practices (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007) and be structured in distinct ways, having different models of

competition, and different competencies and exchange regimes (Araujo, 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007; Araujo *et al.*, 2010). From another perspective, and contradicting the classic idea of the search for balance and stability, markets result from representational, performative practices, composed of imperfections, failures and incidents, and represent results of the relationships of exchange among hybrid, collective agents (human and non-human) (Callon, 1998; Araujo *et al.*, 2010) who play active roles in their formation.

Despite these advances, the guidelines for research and marketing education continue to adopt the managerial perspective, committed to corporate ideologies and still favoring the perspective of only one part of the process while marginalizing others. This can be problematic because theory and concept that seem apparently “ingenuous”, such as the concept of marketing itself and its interest in meeting the “needs” of the consumer, do not seem “so correct” upon thorough examination (Tadajewski and Maclaran, 2009; Tadajewski, 2010, 2011, 2012).

This logic, dominant in marketing studies, ends up disregarding, denying or silencing the dysfunctions caused by the relationships of domination, by distancing as well as by the unequal negotiating conditions that accompany mercantile relationships from production to consumption. These dysfunctions are still present in labor and consumer relationships, between consumers and organizations, and between organizations and their suppliers along the production chain and other relationship networks that shape the complex market environment. Not even the set of laws and regulations seems to have the expected effects in the fight against abusive and illicit marketing practices. Moreover, while the marketing mainstream shows the neoliberal vision of markets, the field is still silent regarding controversial and complex themes that accompany the discussion of what this logic can produce in commercial transactions and in society. Academic studies have been dedicated to relating marketing theory and practice, mainly regarding managerial relevance, from a markedly functionalist focus. Meanwhile, the marketing and society relationship seems to follow increasingly distinct paths, resulting in an escalation of conflicts and criticism of the discipline (Tadajewski, 2010, 2011).

In this scenario, discussing the externalities related to consumption and all the adversity associated with it, such as conducting marketing studies in such a complex, unequal and abusive environment, requires discussions that are not only broader and multidisciplinary, but also mainly investigative postures linked to perspectives that can go beyond the traditional methods for scrutinizing phenomena related to the market environment. We cannot ignore the undeniable contribution of marketing studies to the interpretative perspective of the consumer and their epistemic assumption that knowledge of phenomena can only be understood by observing them closely, through studies of consumers or consumer groups, with an interdisciplinary and anthropological view of consumption, focused on a “micro” perspective (Tadajewski, 2010, 2011; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Dholakia, 2012). However, it is essential to suggest an epistemological leap to a paradigm that removes us from the place of supposed scientific neutrality and allows us to recognize that, as researchers, teachers, academics and professionals, no matter what role we play, we are part of it. That is, an epistemological position that proposes a way of doing science that is inseparable from its historical and social context and is capable, above all, of reconnecting with political and ethical consciousness (Morin, 1982).

From the entire discussion of the context of businesses, the new perspectives of understanding markets in marketing linked to a more critical and politically engaged perspective of marketing studies, there emerged the motivation to develop a theoretical essay aiming to propose a study agenda that can articulate market studies and critical marketing. In other words, the intention is to make a contribution to market research in the field of marketing, beyond the current stage of market dynamics, proposing an analysis of markets from a critical perspective.

Some points are considered essential to justify this proposed study. First, thinking about critical market studies opens an incipient research front in the international context

(Tadajewski, 2010). Second, one can say that dealing with phenomena of this nature implies interdisciplinary approaches since the difficulty of dealing with the various and distinct themes involved carries us through distinct academic fields. However, they can dialogue in and with administration. Obscure themes often require complex approaches. Third, stirring up the debate and awakening other researchers to approach it, in the various areas that we have in our scope thinking about the stages from production to consumption, inevitably involves interests in Logistics, Human Resources, Strategic Management, Social Responsibility, Finance, among others. This point can be one more positive aspect that justifies the proposal of the present article since it pushes marketing beyond its traditional borders, bringing disciplines and knowledge from fields into its scope. Moreover, dealing with the scrutinizing of market phenomena from a critical perspective requires articulating research methods and techniques that evidently are not part of the catalogue of possibilities of traditional researchers, which can clear the area with other ontological/epistemological perspectives.

The present essay has been organized into four other sections, in addition to this introduction. The first section provides space to discuss the evolution of marketing concepts. The intention was to bring historical and contextual issues to the debate, which culminated with the current stage of the concept of market, in the area of marketing. The next section sheds light on the movement known as studies of market dynamics. Another section was included in the text with the scope of favoring discussions regarding critical marketing that, in the present essay, were considered a lens to denaturalize the concept of market. Finally, in the final considerations, we explain about the ties between market studies from a critical perspective, and propose a research agenda for the field.

2. Seeking a concept of markets in the marketing area

This part of the present article attempts to shed light on some points about the concept of markets in the scope of the marketing discipline. The emphasis is on the attempt to construct something that can be understood as an evolutionary line of the concept and its interconnections with other issues in the discipline.

It should be emphasized, from the outset, that the fundamentals of marketing were built on the economy, which, in turn, emerges and is anchored in normative notions of how to generate national wealth in the context of industrialization. This normative heritage, initially founded and centered on the product, awakens the need to create marketing. This is because, while the economy, in its pure form, took care of the mercantile activities of industry at the turn of the century, marketing stepped in to assume the function of resolving one of the issues of production inefficiency at the time, the problem of distribution. Some of the first efforts of the young discipline were focused on justifying its creation, primarily concerned with distribution (Kotler, 1972; Bartels, 1974; Vargo, 2007).

However, it did not take long for marketing to broaden its scope and deviate from its main focus on distribution. Its agenda has encompassed issues that included the productive process and the marketing of goods, generating debates and discussions about it since then. The circumstances of its origin and the lack of a consistent theoretical foundation have contributed to the extensive debate about its role and scope: what would be the extent of marketing responsibility and involvement in this process? The restricted logic, inherited from the prevailing economic paradigm, has been difficult to overcome, and marketing seems to be accommodated in the belief that the purpose of an organization is to produce and the role of marketing is to sell and distribute. It is evident, therefore, that this logic limits the debate and hinders the theoretical development of the discipline (Kotler, 1972; Bartels, 1974; Vargo, 2007; Araujo and Kjellberg, 2010).

It can be also be affirmed that marketing has always been about the last stage in the chain. Namely, the stage that establishes the relationship of retail with the end consumer, the B2C (business to consumer). Maybe the closest that marketing comes to the market is when it turns to the trading relationships and business transactions that occur between organizations along the chain, from raw materials to retailers, known as B2B (business to business) marketing. B2B marketing consists of the business relationship between organizations, without involving the end consumer. These relationship networks include activities that involve selecting, developing and managing relationships to benefit both parties regarding their respective competencies, resources, strategies, objectives and technologies (Andersen, Narus and Narayandas, 2009). B2B marketing is aimed at the corporate world, consisting of companies, organizations, non-profit institutions and governments where goods or services are exchanged (Andersen *et al.*, 2009).

These theoretical marketing movements toward a discipline that is more managerial and concerned with operational issues, as well as the broadening of its scope, have generated discussions and questions going so far as to affirm that these constant changes and inclusions of roles would result in everything being marketing (Luck, 1969). The generic concept of the discipline provides all possibilities of exchange, not being limited to those made in the market. At the same time that it expands and enriches the discussion, this opening ends up distancing marketing from its origins, weakening its market characteristics, confusing its identity, turning it into merely a portable tool, and distancing marketing research from its historical links to the market (Araujo and Kjellberg, 2010).

While this had been the emphasis of the discipline, it is possible to mention that, in the 1960s, Alderson and Martin (1965) called for a marketing theory that could define markets and explain how they function. For those authors, it was untenable to work only with the idea inherited from classical economics that markets would be a natural given, i.e., where there was trade, there would be a market. Unlike this view, for these authors, markets would be structured and would function on the basis of much effort involving various actors and other elements. More than 50 years later, criticism is still directed at the distancing that seems to keep the discipline from market studies. There are references to the market, such as the consumer market, market segmentation, niche markets, among others, but there are no theoretical constructions about markets that come from marketing (Buzzell, 1999; Venkatesh, Peñaloza and Firat, 2006; Vargo, 2007 Araujo, Kjellberg and Spencer, 2008; Ellis, Jack and Higgins, 2011). Marketing research from the dominant perspective still focus on the satisfaction that can be derived from consumption, without worrying about all the problems that it involves. Kjellberg and Olson (2017) emphasize that the systemic nature of market formation still needs more attention from marketing researchers, and suggest that adjacent markets are promulgated and influence the formation of new markets.

These findings raise important issues about the role of marketing in the creation of markets. After all, “marketing produces markets – and not only that, and not on their own, but nevertheless, marketing produces markets”. With this statement, Araújo *et al.* (2010) intend to reinforce the idea of the narrow relationship between marketing and markets, whose scope is not limited to this, nor would it be fitting for marketing to assume this role alone. Rather, from an interdisciplinary perspective, they join forces to theorize about this. The motivation for these authors represents the effort to show the size of the marketing field and, thus, to distance us from a simplistic view of the concepts that can be used to define the field. This is because there is no stable set of practices or ideas that we can unequivocally call marketing, and its narrow relationship with markets (Araujo *et al.*, 2010).

Such efforts provide insights into the difficulties involved in closing the gap between managerial theory and practice, but they do not eliminate the need for investigations into how marketing theories, together with other theories, can participate in the formation of markets. As

we can see, the challenge faced by marketing to develop a theory of markets that encompasses this broad and complex discussion is not recent. Efforts, here, indicate an emerging view of markets as dynamic and subjective structures that are subject to multiple forces of change. However, the neoclassical view of an objective, detached and deterministic market still seems to influence the dominant models (Araujo, 2007).

The construction of markets is an achievement that depends on the mobilization, interaction and construction of various actors from specialized agencies, regulatory bodies to a set of laws, norms and public policies. It also includes marketing practices since marketing “can be understood as a distributed and heterogeneous set of actors involved in the process, facilitating the exchange and construction of markets” (Araujo, 2007, p. 212). Despite the obvious historical connection between marketing and market, due to the preponderant role of marketing in the construction and operation of markets and the centrality of the concept of exchange that exists in marketing, this discussion historically only outlined the discipline while it was broadly debated in other fields (Araujo, 2007).

With this proximity in mind, the lack of discipline in these discussions, that would justify this recent movement that has encouraged a more purposeful posture for the relationship between marketing and markets, seems surprising. This is seen in the emergence of a set of studies on markets and market dynamics, guided mainly by the Economic Sociology for market exchanges and the creation of market practices, whose objective is to overtake the neoclassical view of markets adopted by marketing (Araujo, 2007; Araujo *et al.*, 2010). Those studies were published in order to resume the discussion and broaden the dominant economic conceptualization of markets as mechanisms of price formation, for a broader view that sees markets as emerging social phenomena.

The field seems finally to have awoken to make its contribution in this global effort to seek a better understanding of markets. Some authors have called this movement, *studies of market dynamics* (Araujo *et al.*, 2010; Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007; Storbacka and Nenonen, 2011; Nenonen, Kjellberg, Pels, Cheung, Lindeman, Mele, Sajtos and Storbacka, 2014). These studies envisage socially constructed markets that, therefore, cannot be seen as finished but rather under constant construction and transformation, based on the relationships and practices of their social agents which are reproduced in the repetition of routines in social life (Cochoy, 1998; Swedberg, 2007). In other words, the market can still be understood as an arena where buyers and sellers, among others, act, continuously constructing and shaping this scenario, protecting their interests, and meeting to establish business relationships and commercial transactions (Swedberg, 2007). However, such function and purpose cannot be attributed only to these marketing practices and actors, but also to the set of other actors and elements that regulate and impose norms on the market, such as the set of laws, rules, social norms and public policies, among others (Fligstein, 2002).

All this movement ended up opening a field in the area of marketing called studies of market dynamics. This topic will be explored more deeply in the next section.

3. Studies about market formation

This discussion of the relationship between marketing and the market comes back to trying to understand how markets emerge, change and stabilize over time through the continued and articulated action of various actors and innumerable institutions. This resumption is important because it enables the shift of the traditional marketing research perspective from the *micro*, with studies focused on the consumer or group of consumers, to the *macro*, on the marketing environment.

Traditionally, markets have been studied in marketing from the economic bias, with studies and theories centered on *production* and *consumption*, focusing almost exclusively on

the interactions of two actors: *consumers* and *producers*. Meanwhile, issues about *through whom* and *what structures of actual exchanges* permeate the relationships between consumers and producers have been scarce (Giesler and Fischer, 2017). By shifting their stance to the social perspective, studies of market dynamics distance themselves from this habitual logic and theorize about markets as resulting from discursive negotiations among multi-stakeholder practices, including the consumer, but not only the consumer. They also consider a broad set of other market *shapers* such as managers, entrepreneurs, media journalists, politicians, scientists, technologists, religious authorities, and political activists (Giesler and Fischer, 2017), among others.

Efforts in this direction indicate an emerging view of markets as dynamic and subjective structures, subject to the multiple efforts of change. However, the neoclassical view of an objective, prominent and deterministic market still seems to influence the dominant models. That is, a central feature of markets is related to the idea that they can be conceived as a place of conflicts and disputes. This does not mean that actors necessarily face continuous paradoxes, but conflicts, dynamism and multiplicity between relationships are real. The multiplicity of practices that make up markets suggests the simultaneous presence of different efforts to shape them. Moreover, multiplicity is a crucial issue to be dealt with if we want to expand the research on performance in addition to well-defined cases in some specific markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006).

Nenonen *et al.* (2014) understand that markets are open and malleable entities and their systemic character, susceptible to malleability, cannot have certain limits. Markets are still performative in a broader sense and can acquire shapes and allow multiple configurations to be hosted simultaneously. As actors stage “their market”, markets tend to multiply in overlapping versions (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006).

In the introductory article to a special edition about markets, published in the journal *Consumption, Marketing & Culture*, Geiger, Kjellberg and Spencer (2012) sought to offer to the marketing community a general, conceptual vision of their theoretical approach to the study of markets, keeping the social sciences disciplines in mind. By constructing a 2 X 2 matrix with dimensions based on the level of socialization and materialization, the researchers discussed the main approaches: neoclassical microeconomics, industrial organization theory, social networks, institutional approaches, Marxist theory, and consumer culture theory, among others. It is interesting to note that, with many appearances and disappearances in the field so far, most studies, however, have been conducted both conceptually and empirically outside marketing, involving researchers from other fields (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007). This debate, intrinsically related to marketing, recently seems to have found a dialogue with researchers in Consumer Culture Theory based on Giesler’s (2008) text about market system dynamics. According to that author, these are understood as complex and dialectical social systems which both shape and are shaped by actors and institutions, and which challenge three problematic biases: economic actor bias, micro-level bias and variance bias (Giesler and Fischer, 2017). We cannot ignore the emergence, in the marketing field, of the movement known as Constructivist Market Studies (Hagberg and Kjellberg, 2014; Mason, Kjellberg and Hagberg, 2015). That movement seems to conform to the way marketing theories help to shape certain market views (Mason *et al.*, 2015).

One issue that cannot be overlooked is related to the understanding that, to understand how market dynamics occur, both academics and professionals need to take a multidisciplinary approach to the topic with new concepts and constructs that go beyond existing linear models. This is because markets are like socio-material performances in which exchanges that are essentially, but not limited to, economic occur. This is because these exchanges are also established through a set of interconnected practices that create and maintain social interactions between heterogeneous entities (Nenonen *et al.*, 2014).

Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) also conceive their understanding of markets from a model whose central characteristic sees the market as a dynamic among actors, the most important of which are: consumers, sellers and the objects exchanged. Based on Latour's actor-network theory (1991), the authors understand that all actors involved in market practice are seen as results of other, associative practices. Also, that they are characterized as networks that assume different roles in different situations and different interactions. This means that the ability to act is regarded as a practical result rather than as an essential, "stable" feature. Thus, in this conception, markets are fluid, consist of different "versions" of themselves, and are shaped by different, competing theories which lead to the understanding of how the various techniques can allow inconsistencies and incompatible practices.

Market practice involves activities that contribute to creating markets, and recognizes three broad and interconnected categories: i) *exchange practices*, activities involved in the consumption and exchange of goods; ii) *normalizing practice*, activities that contribute to the establishment of normative goals for the actors, that is, how the market and/or its actors must be (re)shaped according to (a group of) actor(s); and iii) *representative practice*, activities that represent economic exchanges as markets, that is, that depict the markets and how they work. These three categories of practice are linked through chains of translations involving several intermediaries, such as rules, tools, measurements and metrics (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006).

Based on fundamental principles of sociological theory, which see the social order as encompassing multiple and related strategic fields of action, Kjedgaard, Askegaard, Rasmussen and Østergaard (2017) stressed how the consumer agency, while an actor who plays a leading role in the market dynamics, may be used strategically to change the formally organized activities in the beer market of Denmark. The changes observed in this market are based on propositions stated by those consumers, who are organized in an association and perform a significant, institutionalized role in the configuration of this market (Kjedgaard *et al.*, 2017).

The socio-cognitive approach to markets complements this view, emphasizing the stabilizing role of cognitive structures shared among market participants. In addition to being malleable and open, they are also unstable, subject to frequent alterations and changes. The market can also be considered a place of exchanges, where the interests (demand and supply) of the actors are related and reshaped through movements and practices that have agency. These views see markets as social arenas where organizations, suppliers, consumers, workers, and government interact and affect market behavior. It is necessary to shift our gaze, in order to understand the production dynamics among organizations, the same way that work dynamics are internal to themselves. That is, it is necessary to understand the social construction of the product, which goes beyond its production (Fligstein and Dauter, 2007), revealing dysfunctions, conflicts and quarrels.

At this point, an issue arises that is essential in the context of the present study. As this debate sheds light on a number of contradictory and conflicting aspects of capitalism, analyzing the markets from a critical perspective may represent the opportunity to establish a systematic agenda of studies. Therefore, the present study focuses on perspectives that can problematize the role of marketing in society, as well as point out criticisms related to the discipline. This will be the theme of the next section.

4. Critical marketing: a lens for denaturalizing markets?

To begin the debate about what critical marketing is, it should be noted that, since 1960, marketing practices have always been guided by the discourse of "satisfying the needs of your clients". That is, marketing starts from a "moral basis" whose main premise is to increase its profitability continually by meeting the concerns of its consumers (Crane, 2000; Crane and Desmond, 2002; Kotler and Levy, 1969). However, even though this is a widely recognized

commitment, the field has been challenged continually to pay more attention to the dark side of the decisions of marketing managers rather than focusing only on the “beneficial” aspects of their actions. These actions are almost always aimed at ensuring the distribution of an ever-increasing variety of products and services (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008).

The critical marketing movement, like the criticism of marketing, is not recent and appears with gradual and punctual protests. Throughout the history of the discipline, there have been studies and initiatives from academic institutions on the subject. For example, the University of Wisconsin focused, for a time, on marketing studies that supported topics such as social justice and ethics. Subsequently, these actions were enhanced by the management approach of the Harvard Business School, which preferred to work with training aimed at marketing management professionals rather than to look at the market as a whole (Tadajewski, 2010).

During the 1930s, there are records of specific, critical movements, fruits of journalists’ initiatives, advertising professionals and some academics. In the period after World War II, critical market analyses were virtually nonexistent. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the rebirth of critical marketing research was seen, with younger academics involved in critical studies, motivated mainly by the discomfort caused by the way marketing was associated with an industrial perspective of the time (Arnold and Fisher 1996; Kassarian and Goodstein 2010).

Criticism was also directed at the role of marketing in stimulating consumption and the expansion of materialistic values to an increasing number of people, stimulating strong discussions, mainly associated with socio-environmental movements. This criticism was responsible for the movement that awakened some academics to rethink the relationship of marketing with society (Tadajewski, 2010; Tadajewski and Cluley, 2013). According to Tadajewski and Maclaran (2009), the first academic discussions of critical marketing can be seen in terms of their geographic location from a European base in the 1980s, with names like Heede, Hansen, Ingebrigtsen, Pettersson, and Arndt, among others. Although working from different perspectives, a group of researchers is also emerging in North America, represented by Benton, Firat, Dholakia, Venkatesh, Kilbourne, Ozanne, and Murray, to name a few. What they have in common is greater concern for theoretical rather than epistemological perspectives such as Marxism, critical theory, feminism, and post-structuralism among others. These perspectives are used to question the naturalized assumptions in the theory and practice of marketing (Tadajewski, 2011).

Studies of critical marketing are directed “to challenge concepts, ideas and ways of thinking that present themselves as ‘neutral ideas’, or that otherwise have been naturalized in the field” (Tadajewski, 2011, p. 83), under several theoretical perspectives. In other words, critical marketing is interested in questioning capitalist values raised by neoclassical economics, especially the concepts of profit and the individualism of consumer behavior (Tadajewski, 2014). Thus, the conduct of marketing practices must be based on these regulations so that illegitimate practices are banned. After all, the interests of the organization and society are not, and they should not fundamentally disagree (Sheth and Sisodia, 2005).

Debates involving ideology pervade discussions of critical marketing. This ideology, in marketing, refers to the conventional and unquestionable ways of representing marketing. That is, in this sense there seems to be a discourse linked to marketing that can be seen as a tool of domination, which can limit our moral or personal, and even material, freedom (Hackley, 2009).

Furthermore, socio-discursive imagery about marketing builds negative images about it. It is relatively common to relate marketing to pejorative ideas, such as: it influences, manipulates and acts on the wishes and decisions of the consumer, it can persuade consumers and “take advantage” of their weaknesses, it stimulates materialism, among others. Specialized journals have been dedicated to investigating, as a permanent research line, the ethical

dilemmas that accompany the discipline and practice of marketing. Marketing has had a negative image for a long time (Tadajewski, 2010) and, in an attempt to improve this premise, there has been an ongoing effort of researchers in the field to clarify this “misunderstanding”, through the publication of articles and book chapters. These publications address marketing theory and practice, placing it in its broader historical, social, cultural and political context, highlighting its importance and benefits to the market and to the actors involved (Tadajewski, 2011).

It is important to consider that the movements that prioritize humanistic perspectives, in a context motivated by a “consumer ideology”, end up being obscured by the central marketing discourse about producing and reproducing its “vocation” of serving the client and the market. While the mainstream supports the discourse that marketing continues performing its valuable function of providing resources, improving the economy and the quality of life of consumers, meeting their needs and valuing their sovereignty, from a critical perspective, we seek to deconstruct these narratives and to raise discussions. The way that the concept of marketing is constructed can change the conception of power relations between organizations and consumers, as well as the interest of the end consumer in the market, the nature of markets and government controls. Critical marketing studies represent an incipient yet evolving field that continually redefines itself with innovative perspectives, both inside and outside the discipline of marketing. The marketing research space can be divided into three categories: a huge mainstream that dominates the field and takes a positivist perspective, a small but growing body of research that uses interpretative approaches, and an even smaller group of critical studies. This latter is so out of the mainstream that it could be characterized as “off-stream” research (Tadajewski, 2010).

Dholakia (2012) claims that, in the North American setting, this separation among marketing research groups is so pronounced that there is a nearly impenetrable barrier between the non-critics and the critics. Attempts to create radical and critical marketing discourses have been circumvented and obstructed, and researchers who “dare” to address critical topics are often forced to publish in European journals. According to the author, this barrier is created by the research elite in the discipline. Fortunately, however, this scenario has been different in Europe. It is notable that studies in the United Kingdom and some Nordic countries, also in Germany and France, do not show much evidence of critical marketing approaches. One way to make this discussion more productive and to reduce resistance would be to bring marketing research to a more “macro” perspective, to study and analyze market dynamics and their actors and not only the consumer in isolation.

In doing this, researchers would be motivated to establish a dialogue with other disciplines and then, through this interdisciplinarity, establish a considerable body of critical work. However, these approaches, that attempt to break with the marketing mainstream, do not assume paradigmatic perspectives that could exert a broader disruptive influence. For these repercussions to become transformative, interdisciplinary alliances between researchers who study and those who theorize the complex relationships between market and society are necessary. This necessity is not only to produce a radical change in academic priorities, but also to pool collaboratively the intellectual resources needed to analyze and solve complex social problems.

As a result of the intense global inequality, it is time to go beyond the individual (consumer) or community (groups of consumers) and the “culture”, to the inter-sectorial relationships among subjectivity, power, resistance and sociopolitical structures. It is necessary to break with the historical silence that accompanies the discursive formation of marketing in relation to market configurations and consumer policies as a discipline, as a management practice, as a tool. In this way, critical marketing becomes one possibility for criticizing the market and the very mainstream of marketing, in addition to raising important questions,

problematizing its dysfunctions, consumption paradoxes, illicitness, illegalities and social consequences.

5. Transitional considerations: for a research agenda of critical market studies

The last section of the present article does not make final considerations, much less conclude the matter. On the contrary. The objective here, based on the interaction between the discussions of systems of market dynamics and critical marketing, is to point out the sticking points and, mainly, to propose a research agenda involving the two fields in order to contribute the possible introduction of a new and promising topic in the area of marketing, something that could be known as critical market studies.

To do this, we should say that even taking into account the evident advances in market dynamics, such studies still maintain, as in the related investigations of Consumer Culture Theory, a striking trend in the sense of describing the phenomena uncritically, even with the incorporation of the perspective of the various actors involved.

In other words, these studies focus on a set of narratives that, despite their relevance to the field, do not challenge the current social structures, which do not problematize the dysfunctions of the actions of the organizations and that accept the functionalist marketing discourse.

When assessing the evolutionary line of marketing, it is possible to see that we have made a lot of progress in studies focused on consumer understanding regarding their individual autonomy and consumer groups with studies on identity and resistances, among others. However, we need to move forward in the “macro” marketing perspective studies. That is, we need to broaden our vision and observe the market environment as a whole and its complex dynamics and transactions. Marketing has been summoned to engage in the discussion. In addition, it is necessary, in marketing studies, to focus more on criticism that may challenge some assumptions and ideological identifications around which the discipline has historically been based (Hackley, 2009).

In a context of intense competition, in which organizations are compelled to offer maximum returns to their shareholders, one can observe unethical and anti-social postures adopted by them in the pursuit of their goals, with losses to consumers, workers, the environment and communities. Market expansion can lead to a number of problems and marketing practices that include discrimination, abuse, exploitation, among others. Organizations participating in a market, their interests and ambitions, are strongly influenced by the position they occupy in the market.

When the various actors adopt an unethical, unlawful or illegal behavior, it becomes impossible to sustain the structure of this market, leading to a disruption in its balance, forcing the other actors to adopt the same conduct under penalty of being excluded from market.

In an attempt to contribute to these studies, we understand that we cannot address these dysfunctions by observing only their dynamics and relationships between their actors. It is necessary to create a path that examines the moral and political aspects of the markets, their transgressions, illegalities and the dark, dirty and clandestine side, in addition to the “simple” and “behaved” market descriptions. These descriptions are limited to interpret the mercantile relations between the actors anchored in the pretentious, but also hypocritical scientific neutrality. As a starting point, this new path is only possible if we adopt a critical orientation aimed at removing the “veil” that covers these issues, historically erased from marketing debates. From an ideological standpoint, we can think that, in marketing, an ideology that silences alternative forms of expression, values and interests remains intact. Is that why critical marketing is still considered a field under construction? In other words, why are other voices

weighing, problematizing and questioning issues involving market practices still incipient? Is there room for voices that may be considered unusual or dissonant in the market?

We suggest some possibilities of developing other studies that include, for example, one of the predominant players in the market, the consumer. How do they behave, facing such issue? At what point do we mature as conscious and engaged consumers? Do we have a weak or strong will? Would we be able to promote anti-consumption actions? At what point would we influence the market? Would we be able to change its practices?

Revealing the obscure side of some mercantile transactions means discovering, for example, that legal products and services, linked to a formal market, may be associated with various spurious practices. They may be present in several parts of the production chain, from production to consumption: from the use of raw materials produced under inappropriate conditions to the production stages, such as the use of labor analogous to slavery, exploitation of child labor, undocumented women and immigrants in labor relations, without leaving aside bribery and systemic corruption. Likewise, we need to address not only the contested and banned markets, but also the formal markets that apparently do not have questionable practices, such as the financial market and the pharmaceutical industry, but whose practices are elusive and need to be investigated and revealed. This discussion also includes the markets of food, beverage, beauty products and electronic games, among others, that need to undergo greater moral and ethical scrutiny regarding their strategies for reaching consumers who are not only financially destitute, but also vulnerable.

Furthering this discussion and attempting to make a contribution to these studies, we understand that we cannot address these dysfunctions only by observing their dynamics and the relationships among their actors. It is necessary to create a path that examines the moral and political aspects of the markets, their transgressions, illegalities and dark, dirty and sometimes clandestine side. As a starting point, this is only possible if we adopt a critical orientation aimed at removing the “veil” that covers these issues, historically erased from marketing debates. Revealing the obscure side of some mercantile transactions means, among other things, discovering that products and services freely and legally marketed, linked to a formal market, may be associated with several spurious practices, which may be present in several parts of the production chain, from production to consumption.

It is also possible to mention contested or banned markets. Their practices and transactions, frequently, are immediately rejected, because they explicitly assume conflicting practices. We can point out, as an example, drug trafficking, prostitution, commercialization of human organs, surrogate pregnancy, human trafficking, among others. However, there are also markets located in the formal, conventional zones, which are considered legal and/or accepted by the society. These are the majority. However, formal markets conceal illegal operations, which straddle the line between formality, illegality and lawlessness. These markets are interesting sources of research because they possess characteristics and peculiarities that place them at the borders of the formal, the informal and the illegal.

However, the possibilities do not stop here. The agenda also includes several topics that comprise issues involving ways of creating and maintaining the vulnerability of consumers of intersectional poverty, permeated by issues related to gender, ethnicity and social circumstances. Other topics are gaining importance in this context, such as dysfunctions of the market that lead to exacerbated materialism, deviant consumption, food problems, as well as social conflicts, stigmatization and violence against minorities.

It is clear, then, that the topics of this agenda involve other areas of study that extrapolate the marketing scope. Within the discipline, these topics are dear to the fields of marketing and society, from the activist school of marketing theory (Sheth, Gardner and Garrett, 1988), also comprising the connections to the most critical perspectives of consumer studies, including transformative consumer research.

It is worth mentioning that, taking this context into consideration, it is urgent to create analytical tools to critically evaluate and challenge such processes. This can be done by simply putting the emphasis on more relevant markets, with more systemic impacts. We are talking about the commercialization of legal goods, marketed in the formality of a legal and formal market. Ultimately, the limitless expansion of the market would annihilate the economy because the management of purchasing power by the market would liquidate companies on a regular basis, since the lack and the excesses of money would be as disastrous for businesses as the floods and droughts were for primitive societies (Polanyi, 2001). In short, to develop critical market studies from the perspective of critical marketing is, therefore, to challenge organizations' practices, confronting their hegemonic strategies and questioning mercantile transactions mediated by the market. This makes critical studies an even greater challenge for researchers (Tadajewski and Cluley, 2013; Tadajewski, 2014; Tadajewski, Chelekis, DeBerry-Spence, Figueiredo, Kravets, Nuttavuthisit, Peñalosa and Moisander, 2014).

To conclude the essay, it is interesting to go back to the objective set forth in the introduction that urged us to discuss all the points developed here. We can say that we have achieved what we proposed. However, far from being able to address thoroughly all aspects and issues that this study came across, we understand that we have left several doors wide open and others ajar. We understand that this essay can be considered a “starting point” for other discussions that can empirically further the proposals pointed out here. Furthermore, other texts may also attempt to contribute to the epistemological discussions of the topics articulated here, as well as to propose methodologies that can respond appropriately to the complexities required by what we are calling critical market studies.

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