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Uniting Critical Theory and Public Policy to Create the Reflexively Defiant Consumer

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Postmodern extensions of critical theory are used to explore traditional notions of consumer education. Generally, marketing researchers, consumerists, and policymakers have emphasized the importance of making the consumer critical through providing consumers with more complete information and better skills. However, this focus on improving consumers' decision making leaves the existing system virtually unquestioned and intact. An alternative vision of a critical consumer is offered. The authors suggest that consumers must become more radically critical or reflexively defiant by dropping this natural attitude toward the existing order and, instead, questioning economic, political, and social structures. This article attempts to create a new discourse for consumers and suggests that public policy can help consumers become aware of their power to define and fulfill their own needs.

In a postmodern society, people maneuver through an information-rich environment in which their relationships with other people are increasingly being mediated by forces such as television, VCRs, computers, and information highways. This *hyperreality* creates new cultural spaces that shape our understanding of ourselves and our environment, and may require different adaptive skills (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). The marketplace is one example of the changing cultural spaces that we face. The explosion of information technology means that the late-20th-century consumer can shop from their televisions, scan their bank checking cards at grocery stores, and order merchandise at home using their computers. As consumers make choices in this mediascape, information technology facilitates the tracking, recording, and storing of information about their behavior at unprecedented levels. What are the implications of this new marketplace—and how should consumers respond in face of these new cultural forms? A more insurgent consumer may be needed to challenge and contest the role of the postmodern marketplace in fulfilling and defining their needs.

The purpose of this article is to suggest a point of convergence between critical theory and public policy. This convergence suggests a different type of

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consumer, one that is empowered to reflect on his or her social conditions to decide how to live. This decision may result in informed participation in the consumer culture, the reflexive defiance of this lifestyle, or a creative combination of these two strategies.

Critical theory is the term that is often used to describe the work of the group of researchers who coalesced around the Frankfurt Institute beginning in the early 1920s (Held, 1980). The early theorists, who included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich Pollack, wanted to use interdisciplinary approaches to study the link between the individual and society. Contemporary social theorists have extended and revitalized the ideas of the Frankfurt School. These extensions make critical theory relevant to a postmodern marketplace that is characterized by an explosion of information and increasingly abstract symbolism. For example, Habermas expresses the emancipatory interest in terms of a theory of communication; Baudrillard takes the Frankfurt School's theory of one-dimensional society to a higher level by using the semiological theory of the sign to describe the world of commodities (Kellner, 1989). These theorists seek to systematically critique society to help people envision new forms of social organization (Adorno, 1973; Baudrillard, 1981; Habermas, 1971; Horkheimer, 1972; Jay, 1973). Thus both critical theorists and public policy analysts share the common goal of trying to improve the quality of people's lives that are shaped by social structures such as laws and public policy (Forester, 1985b; Murray & Ozanne, 1991).

Although critical theory and public policy both emphasize theory-directed social change in the public interest, their research traditions have stressed different parts of this theory-practice equation. Public policy research generally emphasizes the practice side of this equations (e.g., studying the impact of deregulation on marketing and consumer welfare, changing perspectives at the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration, consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, advertising practices, consumer education, etc.). Critical theorists, on the other hand, emphasize the theory side of this equation. These researchers live in an abstract world of ideas such as materialism (as a proposed solution to Cartesian interactive dualism), immanent critique (as a proposed solution to problems associated with foundationalism), functional ethical relativism, dialectics, ideal speech situations . . . (Murray & Ozanne, 1991). Because the two traditions emphasize different elements of the same theory-practice equation, or what the critical theorists would refer to as *praxis*, they each have something to offer the other. For example, critical theory's longstanding commitment to creating forms of social organization that make possible freedom, justice, and reason could usefully guide the making of public policy. Similarly, the policy analysts' focus on concrete policies could help with critical theory's ongoing struggle to translate theory into meaningful action (Forester, 1985b).

The work of the Frankfurt Institute, together with contemporary critical and postmodern theorists, spans many decades and covers a wide range of topics and therefore cannot be presented as a single, unified approach. Critical theory was

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meant to be an unfinished, ongoing, and open-ended project so it could be adapted to explore social contexts not yet realized (Jay, 1973; Murray & Ozanne, 1991, 1994). In addition, the problems critical theory selects to analyze are so penetrating and integral to the social system that solutions do not come easily and may never be found. Yet critical theory explores many issues that are of potential interest to public policy making. For example, critical methodology highlights the connections between an individual's interpretation of policies and social structures, or what Morrow (1994) has referred to as *interpretive structuralism*. This method may contribute to different aspects of public policy research. Similarly, critical theory's systematic and historical analysis of various forms of domination could help inform and broaden public policy research aimed at protecting consumer rights and broader social interests.

Here, rather than attempt to cover the broad scope of critical theory, we have chosen to focus on Habermas's recent attempts to revitalize critical social research (Habermas, 1971, 1975, 1989). Specifically, Habermas's theory of communicative competence has much to contribute to the area of consumer education. We also draw on Baudrillard's (1981) extension of Marx in his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. First, we review traditional ideas about the need for education to create critical consumers. Next, Habermas's theory of communicative competence is briefly introduced. Finally, the implications of both Habermas and Baudrillard are considered for informing our ideas on what it means to be a *reflexively defiant* consumer.

THE TRADITIONAL NOTION OF THE INFORMED CONSUMER

Different scholars have noted various rights of buyers and sellers during marketplace exchanges. For example, whereas sellers have the right to bring products to the market, and the right to price, promote, and distribute these products, buyers have the right to refuse to buy products, to expect products to be safe, and for products to perform as claimed (e.g., Kennedy's 1962 statement of consumers' rights).

Across different marketplaces and times, we have had various ideas about what skills and understandings are needed to be a critical consumer in marketplace exchanges. For example, during the most recent wave of consumerism beginning in the 1960s, consumer groups and the government saw an imbalance in this buyer-seller exchange and attempted to improve the rights of consumers. Bloom and Greyser (1981) have suggested that this wave of consumerism sought to "help people get satisfaction in the marketplace" (p. 131) because products were increasingly complex, services (that are intangible) were growing, and new forms of retailing (such as self-service) were growing. Seeking to protect consumers through legislation, their successes included the Truth in Packaging, the Truth in Lending, and the Consumer Product Safety Acts.

Although consumers can always refuse to buy products, consumer advocates and policymakers have argued that unless the consumers are educated and

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informed, they will not choose wisely. Thus the importance of complete information and protecting consumers from questionable products and marketing practices have been stressed. For instance, consumers have the right to know the real cost per unit of a brand, the ingredients in a product, accurate nutritional information, and truthful claims in advertising. Consumers are provided more information and improved skills through a range of strategies: legislation, consumer education, information services, redress assistance, and consumer representation. To summarize, the traditional view from a public policy perspective has been that if consumers are informed and educated, they can make rational choices (Bloom & Greyser, 1981).

The focus by many consumer researchers on problems of processing information fits clearly within this view of the well-informed consumer. Not only must we be concerned about whether or not consumers get enough information but can they get this information in the form and amount that they can process? (For example, the information overload debate is an example of this concern [Jacoby, 1984; Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974; Malhotra, 1984; Summers, 1974; Wilkie, 1974].)

HABERMAS'S THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Habermas is also concerned with understanding various forms of distorted communications that exist throughout contemporary society. Distorted communication occurs in a variety of ways; for example, blind adherence to tradition, presenting ethical or marketing problems as scientific ones, using authority or experts as guides, or accepting knowledge claims at face value. All these instances involve the potential for people to act in such a way as to maintain or endorse a social system that may not be in their own self-interests. If people blindly follow authority, for instance, within their organization, they may unknowingly reproduce a dominant/submissive relationship that legitimizes and reinforces their subordination. The communication that is involved in this reproduction is therefore distorted from the point of view of the repressed.

To develop his theory of distorted communication, Habermas first identified the core expectations that must exist for reciprocal, everyday communication to take place. By identifying these expectations, Habermas developed a benchmark against which all forms of distorted communication can be compared. Habermas reasoned that as we enter into dialogue with others, we anticipate that (a) others will speak so we can understand them (i.e., the norm of comprehensibility), (b) they will communicate their true intentions (i.e., the norm of sincerity), (c) they will communicate based on a shared normative context (i.e., the norm of legitimacy), and (d) they will speak the truth (i.e., the norm of truthfulness). These shared expectations are Habermas's universal norms of pragmatics; they are the competence that we must share if we are to communicate successfully without distortion (Grahame, 1985; Forester, 1985b). Furthermore, Habermas has stated that a rational consensus can be reached only if there is a "symmetrical distribution

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of chances to select and employ speech acts" (Habermas, quoted in McCarthy, 1978, p. 306). General symmetry refers to a situation in which all people have an equal opportunity to engage in discourse unconstrained by authority, tradition, or dogma. This condition of symmetrical free speech is Habermas's ideal speech situation.

Habermas's identification of an ideal speech situation provides the grounds for the critique of distorted communication. Distorted communication reproduces those belief systems that "could not be validated if subjected to rational discourse" (Schroyer, 1973, p. 163). Because of unacknowledged social forces in the self-formation process, humans may not be cognizant of distorted communication. Through critique and dialogue, unquestioned assumptions and claims can be challenged in order to reconstruct a communicative competence that, in turn, leads to a rational consensus. Thus the ideal speech situation anticipates an ideal social structure that makes possible freedom, justice, and reason (Murray & Ozanne, 1991).

Habermas's theory provides the basis for a broad critique of society. Many failures to communicate are used to legitimize existing structures in society. Those people who are benefiting from the existing structures and forces of production may use communication to legitimate their power so that it has a taken-for-granted status. They may attempt to narrow the domain of communication to exclude the interests of others. They may raise scientific and technical evidence as having the legitimacy to solve moral problems. And they may narrow political participation to exclude those issues that threaten existing patterns of power. Thus Habermas's analysis of communication at the interpersonal level becomes the basis for analysis of social and political structures (Forester, 1985a).

THE CRITICAL CONSUMER

How can Habermas's theory of communicative competence be used to inform our notions about being a critical consumer? Habermas's ideal speech situation is clearly an unrealizable goal; nevertheless, its power lies as an axiology that can guide actions toward a particular vision (Murray & Ozanne, 1991). Thus it might be useful to identify where in the marketplace an exchange exists that most closely approaches this ideal. Although public policy has given the consumer more power, the buyer-seller exchange does not exhibit general symmetry because sellers have the upper hand; sellers control the information that is exchanged, have resources to empirically test their claims, and have access to mass media to promote their products.

Perhaps the growing number of publications, like *Consumer Reports*, more closely approximates the goal of ideal speech. Here, we have a third party that is fairly independent from the buyer-seller exchange (norm of sincerity). This organization has the resources to substantiate empirically product claims and then report them to the public in a fairly inexpensive form (greater general

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symmetry). Potential goods and services are compared in matrices in which relevant attributes across different brands are compared (norm of truthfulness) under a variety of conditions (norm of legitimacy). Generally, this format does not give preferential treatment to a product and instead allows each consumer to compare and contrast products in the ways that they desire (norm of comprehensibility). Thus embodied in the structure of the report is the attempt to avoid a single, authoritative reading of the text (Grahame, 1985).

Although *Consumer Reports* approximates Habermas's ideal speech situation, implicitly it assumes that the consumer is going to evaluate alternatives in a consideration set and make a choice. In other words, it assumes participation in a consumer culture. It does not encourage reflection on the origins of this culture and which groups in society benefit from this system. In other words, from a traditional public policy perspective, the informed consumer is critical within the bounds of the existing society.

For example, when consumerists, market researchers, and public policy analysts focus primarily on informing and educating the consumer to improve decision making, in many ways consumer education has become appropriated by the dominant system. Consumer resistance is one more form of opposition that is incorporated by the system. The promise of consumerist movements is that the consumer will become an active, critical consumer. And to the extent that people become better decision makers, the promise appears to have been delivered. But this form of criticalness serves to recreate the existing system by more firmly entrenching people into their primary role in life as consumers: "Consumers are undone by their very preoccupation with consumption" (Grahame, 1985, p. 166). Consumers become motivated not by dreams of justice, truth, or ideal speech, but by stepping up to the next level of neighborhood, house, furniture, automobile, or accessory (Murray & Ozanne, 1994; Waters, 1994). The structure and function of the marketplace may be refined and improved, but its role in satisfying consumers' needs is given and fixed; at no time is the role of the marketplace questioned.

THE REFLEXIVELY DEFIANT CONSUMER

Let us return to the format of *Consumer Reports* and dig deeper into the underlying assumptions implicit in such a document. The report assumes the existence of an underlying need that can be fulfilled by acquiring the product, that the choice problem involves a rational weighing of attributes, that performance criteria can be made empirical, and that these criteria can be objectively rated.

For example, if consumers were to evaluate a wood cleaning product along the lines suggested by *Consumer Reports*, they would read about the ratings of various product attributes, then, using a compensatory process, make a decision as to the most effective brand for cleaning wood. Motivating and underlying this process is the sign value (symbolism created by the ensemble of objects) of particular interior designs that communicate taste, image, history, prestige, and

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social status. Choosing objects on the basis of sign value comes not from a rational compensatory or noncompensatory decision-making process but from enculturation (i.e., the consumer internalizes the "consumption code" through the process of socialization). Although the consumer may not be consciously aware of the consumption code, continual interpretation of the sign value of literally hundreds of products each day is necessary to construct a place within the social system—to fit in. From this perspective, acquisition and consumption can be considered *productive activity*, requiring socialization, education, and effort. This productive activity is necessary for social integration and, therefore, for the development of self and identity.

This point of view suggests that consumption does not merely arise in response to fundamental human needs or use values (utility); it is social activity that integrates consumers into a specific social system and commits them to a particular social vision. In other words, consumption does not stem from the realm of nature (i.e., the primordial satisfaction of needs) but from the realm of culture. Consumption is a *cultural code* that expresses the logic of differentiation and creates a social structure (Baudrillard, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984; Jameson, 1991; Kellner, 1989). According to Baudrillard (1981), as individuals consume the code, they reproduce the system: "Through objects a stratified society speaks and, if like the mass media, objects seem to speak to everyone, it is in order to keep everyone in a certain place" (p. 38). Thus as individuals are socialized by the institutions of late capitalism, they find themselves challenged by a system of needs in which satisfaction reproduces their own social domination (Kellner, 1989).

To refuse to reproduce this social domination means that the consumer must rebel against the code or seek new consumption styles. Thus a more radical notion of the informed consumer would involve consumers forming a different relationship to the marketplace in which they identify unquestioned assumptions and challenge the status of existing structures as natural. Through reflection, the consumer may choose to defy or resist traditional notions of consumption, become more independent from acquisition and disposition systems, or define their own needs independent from the marketplace. Critical theory's emphasis on abstract theory has encouraged reflection on the social totality as only one of many possibilities. Questioning the hegemonic control of the groups in power is a different form of being critical that is consistent with Habermas's suggestion to explore taken-for-granted assumptions in order to reconstruct communicative competence (Murray & Ozanne, 1991, 1994).

If reflexively defiant consumers choose to consciously dissociate themselves from consumption patterns, this estrangement is not alienating because it is a reflexive act. In fact, Baudrillard (1981) would argue that nonreflexive, unconscious consumption is alienating because the objects (things) dominate the subjects (people). Conscious estrangement from "normal" consumption empowers consumers by removing their dependence on the code and the asymmetry between buyers and sellers. By removing dependence and asymmetry,

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consumers have the opportunity to better approximate Habermas's ideal speech situation. At this point, individuals are no longer defined externally by society as consumers but instead define themselves. As a condition of ideal speech, people must reclaim their own voices and become the architects of their own history. The understanding and expression of need would then come from individual citizens rather than from the marketplace.

The reflexively defiant consumer may still acquire products but alter their sign value in the usage situation to signify antagonism and opposition. For example, the defiant consumer may still purchase computers but use networks to better integrate and organize oppositional groups. Or clothes and various forms of body adornment may be used to signify opposition to establishment values. Because products mark distinction and therefore signify identity and standing, oppositional consumption develops the critical imagination (see Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978). As Kellner (1989) has written,

> Capital . . . can commodify music and use it to sell records and concerts, whereas individuals may use it to circulate subversive messages, thereby giving rise to new values and visions of life which may be antithetical to existing capitalist societies. (p. 37)

Because oppositional signs can be quickly appropriated by capital and marketing management, reflexively defiant consumption takes place in subcultures acting as insurgent movements. As soon as the symbol is marketed, it looses its critical force, and the subculture must change the signifier. Other forms of defiance may seek and discover alternatives to acquisition (e.g., borrowing, recycling, self-production, customizing, and various forms of self-sufficiency).

It is the full development of consumer culture beginning in the late 1940s that makes the reflexively defiant consumer a relevant and meaningful concept. Just as rural populations were indoctrinated into industrial labor throughout the 19th century, 20th-century consumers are indoctrinated into systematic and organized consumption (Baudrillard, 1988; Kellner, 1989). As Baudrillard (1988) has written, "The same process of rationalization of productive forces which took place in the nineteenth century in the production sector, is accompanied, in the twentieth century, in the consumption sector" (p. 50). From this perspective, production and consumption are part of the same logical process. After shaping the masses into a labor force, the industrial system was not complete until the masses were also shaped into a consumption force.

Given that current consumers are generally unself-conscious and unorganized as consumers, and given the ease with which capital can seize oppositional symbols, few critical or postmodern theorists view the active manipulation of signs as a theory of agency (Baudrillard, 1981; Kellner, 1989). Yet various forms of mass refusal do have potential for social change. Just as public policy aided labor to become aware (i.e., class conscious) and organized, this process may also aid the consumer in their attempts to become *code conscious*. Only an organized movement of reflexively defiant consumers has the potential to act as agent; public policy can encourage this

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organization. It is in this way that critical theory and public policy can stand together—a quid pro quo.

CONCLUSION

During the late middle ages, as the new emerging merchant class started to challenge the social fabric of feudalism, they began to emulate the consumption habits of the landed class. According to Ewen (1988), "Although the merchants' fortunes were a product of commercial enterprise, their consumption patterns were designed to obtain the imagistic trappings of landed heritage" (p. 27). This consumption eventually led to sumptuary laws designed to preserve class distinctions with sign value (e.g., it was against the law for the new merchant class to wear velvet). Thus, during the first stage of capitalism, public policy was used to preserve the traditional feudal estate. But later, as the monarchy lost power, public policy aided the merchant class in its attempts to revolutionize the social system.

During industrialization, or the second stage of capitalism, a large rural population became indoctrinated into industrial labor. Here, both conservative and critical analyses focused on production (i.e., labor). Again, public policy served both to preserve class distinctions and to help labor become aware and organized in its attempts to revolutionize society.

The First World War, the depression, and World War II kept full-fledged consumer capitalism at bay. However, in the late 1940s and 1950s, it engulfed American culture in full force. Here, both optimistic interpretations of postmodernism and critiques focus on consumption and consumer culture. More than anything else, it is the transition from an analysis of production (with labor as the agent) to consumption (with the consumer as the agent) that marks the postmodern movement (Kellner, 1989). If critical theory and public policy have a future together, they must work hand-in-hand to embrace the idealism of a true democracy and to empower the consumer to become reflexively defiant.

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