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## Commentary

## Marketing as a social science – Comments to Roger Layton's article: "There could be more than marketing you might have thought!"

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With his paper "There could be more than marketing you might have thought!" Roger Layton sets out a seminal agenda for marketing (Layton, 2016). The guiding question is "could marketing be repositioned as a discipline within social science?" I think that it not only could but also should be repositioned as a discipline within social science. However, marketing cannot become a social science if it is restricted to managers/marketers and profit, and if it is only normative. Hunt expressed this well back in 1976: "If marketing is to be restricted to only the profit/micro/normative dimension (as many practitioners would view it), then marketing is not a science and could not become one" (Hunt, 1976, p. 27).

It is high time to (re-) position marketing as a social science. In my view, the understanding of marketing as a Social Science (MASS) is a critical endeavor, particularly for what it excludes. It first and foremost excludes marketing as being only a tool for managing and fostering economic growth or economic profits without caring about "external effects." In this sense MASS is neither a tool for academics nor a tool for marketers or managers. The main goal MASS is pledged to is gaining insights, awareness and/or knowledge in its field for everybody. What can and should the field of MASS be? All the environmental and social externalities and inequalities, which are a result of greed, markets and private equity (inter alia), are at the center of MASS. Marketing knowledge should not only support marketers and managers, it should also support customers and citizens in general.

For example, people often find themselves in a situation of overconsumption, on an individual and a global level. Many people consume more than they "need." I do not talk about need in an abstract sense here. I talk about the things people buy and throw away unused or underused. I talk about food, fat and sugar as other examples. Why do people eat more than they need and more than is

healthy? Is there marketing knowledge for those who try to avoid what they do not need and what may be unhealthy? Is there marketing knowledge to help these people to avoid "attractive seductions?"

Overconsumption has also a macro or even global level. This is condensed in the ecological overshoot. Humanity's annual demand on the natural world has exceeded what the Earth can renew in a year since the 1970s. This "ecological overshoot" has continued to grow over the years, reaching a 50% deficit in 2008. This means that it takes 1.5 years for the Earth to regenerate the renewable resources that people use in one year (WWF, 2012).

These are only two areas in a repositioned field of marketing. Furthermore, marketing as a social science should, among other things

- include value destruction
- include economic inequality
- be environmental responsible
- include "external effects"
- understand that too much growth in "quantity" is misleading.
  - Whereas growth in diversity might be suitable
- understand that exchange is only half the story
- have a clear phenomenon to study
- go beyond human intellect
- integrate micro and macro marketing.

Roger Layton suggested a place to start: "Marketing is the study of value co-creation through voluntary economic choice made in exchange among individuals and entities in and between human communities."

In my view, the field of MASS cannot be restricted to the "sunny side of life," which is value co-creation. Economic exchange is not always value co-creating. There is also value destruction (Echeverri and Skalén, 2011; King and Burgess, 2008; Lefebvre and Plé, 2011; Plé and Chumpitaz, 2010). Furthermore, people – customers in

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particular – are not always rational (see, for example, Ariely, 2009, 2011, and the literature cited there) and hence they are doing many things not fully voluntarily, because they were not considered rationally. People are somehow attracted to do things beyond their rationality and marketers try to set these attractions in the form of products, services, advertisements, or gifts, and customers (people in general) cannot always avoid these attractions. Attractions are in the center of marketing. They are the forces to invite people to activities such as shopping, dressing, eating and so on, including exchange. Since attractions are a force to induce exchange, exchange is not the basis for marketing but is a derivative. Hence, the first fundamental phenomenon for MASS is attraction.

Beside attraction as a force for exchange, a second force is located in the interface between exchanges. One main reason why people do the things they do is that they want either to stay in a preferred state or they want to reach a preferred state (Löbler, 2016b). In both cases, they are looking for a change in their state; if they want to remain in a specific state, it is a change compared against the development without getting a specific product or service. If one gets hungry one wants to remain in a state of not being hungry. Compared to being hungry eating changes the state of the eater (for a discussion and more examples see Löbler, 2016b, pp. 178–9). Together, this is an ongoing process of exchange and change induced by the need for change (in the sense described by (Löbler, 2013, 2016a) and the attractions available. This ongoing process is the center of marketing induced by needs and attractions. Exchange is a consequence of both.

On this basis I suggest then that a place to start might be: *Marketing as a social science is the study of prerequisites, processes and consequences of exchange-change processes induced by needs and attractions in the context of institutions, norms, cultures, values and their impact on society and nature as whole.*

This start tries to bring together a micro and macro perspective of marketing, as Hunt did in 1976, which can be supported now by a systems perspective. It is in the vein of Hunt's definition of macromarketing: "Macro-marketing refers to the study of (1) marketing systems, (2) the impact and consequence of marketing systems on society, and (3) the impact and consequence of society on marketing systems" (Hunt, 1981, p. 8). Whereas the former definitions excluded nature as a fundamental resource-providing environment (or, at least, did not include nature and natural resources explicitly), the proposed definition includes it explicitly. In the center of these considerations now are the marketing system and its impact and consequences on the societal and natural environment, and the impact and consequences of societal and natural environment on the marketing system. Roger Layton's work on marketing systems is seminal in the marketing discipline (Layton, 2007, 2015). However, the idea of marketing systems is not yet based on systems theory. I agree with Robert Mittelsteadt that "A second barrier to interdisciplinary communication reflects a lack of appreciation for the nature, and often changing nature, of other disciplines" (Mittelsteadt, 2016, p. 624). Systems theory is now a broad area of research and there are different perspectives on systems within the discipline (for an overview see for example Bausch, 2001). Layton's work is more in line with early definitions of systems in systems theory, such as von Bertalanffy's understanding of systems (von Bertalanffy, 1950, 1973, ©1968). The word "system" originated in Greek: *σύστημα* *systema*, meaning "whole compounded of several parts or members, system;" literary "composition" (Liddell and Scott, 1940). The first move from this definition where a system is whole of parts, of which Ludwig von Bertalanffy is a leading author, does not only use the distinction of whole and part but that of system and environment: "A system may be defined as a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with environment" (von Bertalanffy, 1973, ©1968). Furthermore, a system needs an 'operational mode' (Löbler, 2016b; Luhmann, 1995, 2006), which

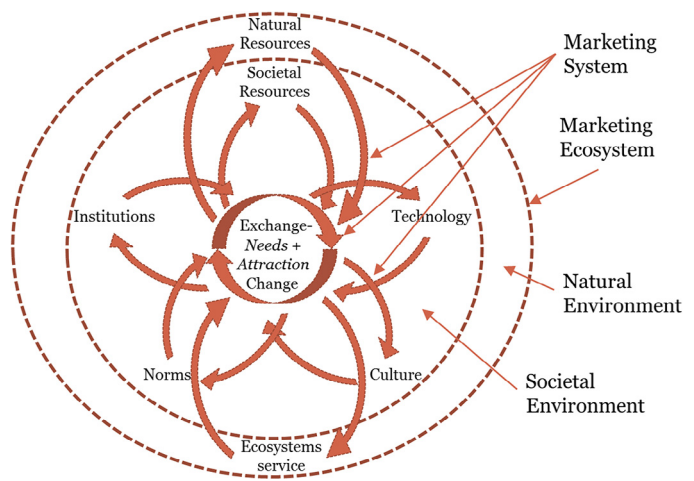


Fig. 1. A model of the marketing system.

is often its main function. This operational mode keeps the system going; it is the driving force of the system. Without such an operational mode, the system would cease to exist as a system, or it would be a static collection of elements only. The operational modes of marketing systems are the exchange-change processes (Löbler, 2013, 2016b) induced by need for change and/or attractions. Many of these exchange-change processes are intertwined; all the processes are embedded in an environment. The arrows in Fig. 1 indicate the marketing system, which is embedded in a societal and natural environment. For the system together with its environment, biologists use the term ecosystem. The term goes back to Tansley who, in 1935, conceptualized the ecosystem as a biological system with its relevant (non-biological) environment (Tansley, 1935, p. 229). Today, the term is used to take biological complexes with their relevant environment together (Chapin et al., 2002, p. 4; Jax, 2006, p. 240). With this, we can say: *Marketing as a social science is the study of prerequisites, processes and consequences of marketing ecosystems* (see Fig. 1). The arrows define the marketing systems depending on the exchange-change processes in question.

In the center of the marketing system, we find the operational mode, the system driving process that is the exchange-change process induced by needs and attractions. These ongoing processes are embedded in societal phenomena like norms, culture, institutions, societal resources and technology or natural elements like natural resources or ecological service. Depending on which phenomena and elements exchange-change processes include, a specific marketing system emerges. Furthermore, exchange-change processes influence society and society influences the ongoing process (Hunt, 1981). Finally, this whole system is embedded in nature. Exchange-change processes influence nature and ecology, and nature and ecology influence the ongoing processes. There is no society, let alone exchange-change process, without nature and natural resources; all these processes are intertwined. With this definition, we connect the micro and macro simultaneously as a marketing ecosystem, which is the marketing system with its relevant environment. With a danger of oversimplification, one can say that in the center of Fig. 1 there is the micro level and the more we get outside the center there is first coming the meso and then further outside there is the macro level.

I propose this frame for marketing as a social science because it enables research into the relevant issues of modern societies, and because it is open enough for all kinds of thoughts and research to be considered. It can be understood as an avenue to the future for what Roger Layton started with; or in the light of Hunt's and others' work should I say "restarted?"

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