



## After Marketing and Social Construction

Pauline Ferguson

**review of:**

Chris Hackley (2001) *Marketing and Social Construction: Exploring the Rhetorics of Managed Consumption*. London: Routledge. (HB: pp.191, £55, ISBN: 0415208599)

After learning of Chris Hackley's recent monograph I was intrigued as to what it might offer. In line with the intent underlining this special issue 'After Organisation Studies', his contribution, as part of an interpretative series within marketing, appeared to be part of a wider move in the development of disciplinary research. Agreeing personally with 'going after the after' (in the sense of pursuing open critique towards progressive ends), this book, by setting out to explore marketing academia in such a way, held undoubted appeal and promise.

Within the book Hackley aims to investigate what he describes as shortcomings within academic marketing. From the beginning, he locates himself outwith the realms of 'mainstream' marketing in order to gain insightful distance from this particular group, as his domain of enquiry. "So I invoke unities like 'marketing' and 'social construction', and indeed 'mainstream' merely in order to destabilise and then reconstruct them in the pursuit of my own literary marketing agenda" (p. 1).

Central to Hackley's pursuit is the notion that the 'mainstream' approach preserves an unhealthy level of prescriptivism, through its ideological maintenance of managerial relevance and consumption expertise. Enabling his description and dislike of the mainstream penchant for the one-dimensional, bullet-point approach where complex social behaviours and conditions are "collapsed into a text of marketing management" (p. 186), Hackley underlines the value of a social constructionist lens. Providing critical distance and an 'alternate' voice for analysis, social constructionism he argues, is a perspective which can facilitate development through an illuminating and emancipatory look at rhetorically closed off areas of marketing thought. Generating understanding into how various texts have been "worked up, sustained and defended" (p. 39) "through

language and other symbolic practices” (p. 46) allows for space, he argues, within which creative and increasingly valuable research can ensue.

## Theoretical Positioning

Hackley underlines his political wish to promote through his book a general “rhythm” (p. 47) of social constructionist acceptance within marketing thought. “I want to try and write about a shifting point of departure for social research in marketing” (p. 39).

Rather than choosing to espouse preference for particular methods, he feels that with respect of the positivist norms pervading the discipline, emphasis should be placed on social constructionism being introduced and accepted more fully as a viable research approach.

With this in mind, Chapter Two demonstrates Hackley’s organisation of some of the main schools and approaches within social constructionist thinking. As such he decides to present concepts like ethnomethodology, sociology of scientific knowledge, post-structuralism and postmodernism in a rather limited, relatively list-like fashion. At one stage in the offering (although one must excuse misinterpretation on my part of any ironic intention by Hackley) he even goes as far as to provide, despite his social constructionist perspective, a nine point list underlining “social constructionism’s potential contribution to marketing thought” (p. 52). Although taken together this constitutes a highly useful resource of references and literature, the presentation of such concepts was at times confusing and arguably (even acknowledging the introductory status of his offering) lacked the necessary depth in dealing with what are often complex issues.

Overall I felt such an approach was slightly disappointing. I would have preferred Hackley to pursue here a more overt and substantial critique of the various social constructionist ideas and influential works. One particular let down came through the omission of some key texts dealing with issues arguably important to his worthy mission. For example, with Hackley’s intent to create distance for himself from his own discipline in order to subject it to reflexive attention, he could have *gone after* (in terms of searching out, as well as building on) the work of Latour and Woolgar (1979), who deal with these central ideas through their concentration on institutionalised knowledge construction. Further, the work of Bourdieu (1988) considering intellectual life, and Law (1994) with his different ideas on organisational ‘ordering’ may perhaps have been useful inclusions.

Additionally, a more explicit development of his own theoretical position through treatment of the literature beyond introductory level, would have in my opinion, offered more value to the text. I would argue that it may have provided a stronger basis for his scholarly intent, as well as facilitating the reader’s ability to comprehend and engage more fully with the analysis later in the book.

## Analytic Closure

The textual scrutiny of marketing's 'mainstream' arrives in Chapter Three with Hackley posing the question: "what are the main ways in which marketing is textually worked up as an empirically bounded, normatively ordered and problem-categorisable field of enquiry?" (p. 74). From this stems a journey within the book which sets out to textually investigate various instantiations of the marketing field.

Hackley raises countless examples of realist discourse which he renders guilty of fuelling an intellectually deprived marketing readership. In trying to unpack this prevailing ideology he critiques standard textbook offerings, provides a thorough investigation into marketing communications rhetoric, as well as spotlighting some of the history and personalities behind major marketing institutions such as the Academy of Marketing. These chapters were aimed at shaking the bastions and presumptions (he presumed) that are instilled throughout the discipline, in order that we may think beyond them. To this end I think Hackley in providing a much needed voice for such issues will be largely successful.

Here may have been a good time for Hackley to engage in a more varied empirical strategy towards exploring the discipline. What struck me, whilst reading through some of his work, was his anecdotal style of reportage, which, whilst offering enlightening opinions, also, ironically, seemed in a way to mirror his main disgruntlement with 'mainstreamism'. By using no naturalistic accounts of how the discourse he spoke of unfolded in the field (i.e. the utterances and actions of the people who are perpetuating such culture), I believe he, like the ideology he critiques, can also be said to have collapsed marketing reality into a text (p. 186). This can be highlighted in the quote below, which underlines Hackley listing his own assumptions as the basis for his research contribution. "Mainstream influences in marketing research theory and education are *intellectually inhibiting, philosophically naïve* and *politically disingenuous*, not to mention *managerially useless*" (p. 8).

Alongside the empirical shortcoming in generating such categories, I also felt that he offered too little direct evidence from the written texts he did choose to deal with. Engaging and working as a reader through Hackley's interpretations without access to the textual data, I suggest may inhibit imagination, and the chance to open insightful personal understandings. Perhaps Hackley missed a chance to untie reflexive potential throughout this book. As he valuably underlines, any move beyond some of the closed thinking within marketing would be most welcome.

## Politics and Text

It is important to raise here, however, that in forwarding criticisms or indeed *going after* Hackley's work myself it is not without a recognition and appreciation of the institutional context within which it has been written. As Hackley himself points out that "research is a political thing constructed through texts" (p. 39), and as such particular modes of expression must have been, of course, subtly (or not) tailored.

A good example of Hackley working within institutional 'reality' may be highlighted well through drawing attention to the extensive citations employed throughout his text. As well as providing a first class guide to research and researchers throughout the marketing field, this at times excessive authorial display of disciplinary knowledge through referencing, perhaps also reveals an element of necessary rigour and legitimacy-seeking on Hackley's part. This along with his excessively self-referring writing style clearly marks out a strategy, unconscious or not, which, arguably highlights to his target audience (those who need tempted to social constructionism) his proclamation of marketing mastery. "Each text, laboratory, author and discipline strives to establish a world in which its own interpretation is made more likely by virtue of the increasing number of people from whom it extracts compliance" (Latour and Woolgar, 1986: 285).

As such, the display deemed necessary on Hackley's part, may perhaps help render himself deserving of an exploration into lesser known territories such as social constructionism. Additionally it may be this style which facilitates the approaches' likelihood of acceptance in the first instance, as well somewhat ironically helping to promote an overall movement towards life *after* mainstreamism.

Acknowledging this inseparable reality of politics and text, my final comment about this book comes from Hackley's 'insistence' on building the blocks of social constructionism within marketing by purely targeting 'mainstream' discourse. I am not suggesting that mainstreamism should be exempt from scrutiny. On the contrary, I think that by *going after* this grouping Hackley demonstrates many times over hugely interesting and previously 'unheard' reasons why they should not be exempt from critical attention. However, given his offering early on in the book that marketing thought is being stifled partly by increasingly divided perspectives within the discipline, the choice here to critique *one* of those sides may well have been unnecessarily antagonistic. As an author who rightly proclaims 'inclusive' (p. 2) intentions for uses of social constructionism within marketing, I feel that by adopting this focus he may have misrepresented the enlightening potential of such an approach. Given the scope of social constructionism to disregard boundaries, this may have been an opportunity for the author to help subvert, not perpetuate, the current futile disciplinary divides.

This last remark represents fairly well my overall evaluation of *Marketing and Social Constructionism*. Although agreeing strongly with the spirit behind Hackley's intention to critically pursue the research potential within marketing, I feel that the manner in which he approached the subject, often denied the full realisation of his goal here. Despite this, I believe that the book through its introduction of the topic, constitutes an important foundation and statement for the discipline in general. It is very much hoped that its ethos substantiates itself further, after *Marketing and Social Constructionism*.

#### references

- Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo Academicus*. Cambridge: Polity.  
Latour, B. and S. Woolgar (1986) *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Princeton University Press.  
Law, J. (1994) *Organizing Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**the author**

Pauline Ferguson is currently a research student and tutor within the Department of Marketing, at the University of Stirling. Her main interest, and topic for her thesis surrounds an investigation into the various knowledge-making practices within academia. As an instantiation of institutional and disciplinary production, her particular focus is on exploring empirically the PhD process within the marketing academy. Appropriating a reflexive and social constructionist position toward developing this work, she is intent on adopting ethnographic methods.

Address: University of Stirling, Department of Marketing, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Scotland

Email: [p.l.ferguson@stir.ac.uk](mailto:p.l.ferguson@stir.ac.uk)