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TARGETED SOCIETY: SHOULD SOCIOLOGY THEORIZE MARKETING?

In this text, I argue that sociology can only really understand the social impact of marketing by theorizing it as a powerful system of practices legitimized by a comprehensive cultural concept. In the first section, I discuss the specific time and place of the birth of marketing. In the second part, I discuss the essence of that truly Copernican revolution (Keith 1960). In the third section, I present the 'need-related' industry that emerged in the frame of the founding idea. Finally, I discuss a basic marketing tool: segmentation. Selecting the target group for a branded offer is one of the key marketing commandments and reaching that group is the key marketing task. Hence, marketing engages in (re) creating and bringing to light target groups, which it then supports, talks with, and listens to. This means that marketing has taken the role of advocating and mediating groups' existence (Latour 2005), engaging in this task over one trillion US dollars annually.

Key words: marketing; group advocacy; needs' industry

Introduction

Marketing as a branch of knowledge originally emerged as a field of practical advice, gathered by entrepreneurs and disseminated among industry associations (Tedlow 1990; Tedlow, Jones 1993; Hernik 2014; Kozielski 2013; Lotko 2013). We could argue that the art of marketing was practised throughout all human history, but in the prevailing view, it is the child of the industrial revolution, conceived by the challenge to grow demand. Initiated as a reflection upon firms' practical problems, marketing moved to universities in the first decade of twentieth century (Hernik 2014). It began its scientific career as a small branch of economics only to emancipate into a separate discipline.

That dual beginning remains visible in the marketing of today, while the split between theory and practice continues. I find it meaningful that – in the case of marketing – this split is stronger than the one that "takes place in economics between economic history and the history of economics" (Kamiński 2014: 102). Kamiński argues that the underlying reason of this relatively stronger split, is "the fact that representatives of academic marketing are not so strongly related to marketing practice as economists with the implementation of economic policy,

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and most innovations in marketing practice are created by businesspeople, not representatives of science" (Kamiński 2014: 102).

Indeed, such ground-breaking marketing concepts as "image," "positioning," or "brand experience" were introduced by practitioners. The publications of experienced practitioners are by no means "scientific" and – on top of that – are sometimes even dubious; suffice it to mention the works by David Ogilvy (2011), Al Ries and Jack Trout (1992, 1997), Paul Feldwick (2002), Jeremy Bullmore (1998), or Berndt Schmitt (1999). Nevertheless, they have become the source of insights for generations of marketers and advertisers. The two types of knowledge retain their distance towards each other, which suggests that there is a disproportionality between the science of marketing and the hard reality of selling at a profit for the company, like in the case of scientific theories of insurance versus the pragmatics of selling a policy to a reluctant customer. The practice performed by insurance agents is not driven by the theory of insurance, so it cannot be understood from an inward perspective. Thus, what practice requires is outward sight.

This is what I propose here: an outward, sociological perspective on the *practice* of marketing, not a sociological contribution to the *science* of marketing. For the purpose of this text, I define "marketing" as the systematic, organized activity performed by a network of various actors – marketing departments and consultants, research agencies, media houses, advertising agencies, and many others – within the frame of the founding insight that places "needs" at the centre of the economic universe (Keith 1960).

In the first section, I will show modern marketing as the child – and culmination – of economic, social, and cultural innovations happening in the USA at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As de Grazia proves (2005), the contributions to modern marketing have been numerous and coming from various sources, from Fordism through Rotary Clubs to the specificity of American society and democracy. However, what is striking is that while marketing was originally implemented by US companies as an answer to the challenge of mass production, it quickly expanded to other continents and sectors. Modern marketing tools are used by political parties, public institutions like city halls or universities, nongovernmental organizations, and finally, individuals: in the form of the personal branding (Gorbatov, Khapova, Lysova 2018).

The pace and scope of marketing expansion strongly suggests that it is not just a new way of running business but a much broader and universal idea, implementable in almost any type of activity. By "idea," I mean here an insight, concept, or theory that changes – and sometimes turns around – how we perceive and conceive the world. That kind of "Copernican revolutions" happen not only in science (Kuhn 1962/1970) but also in culture, economy, or society. By populating our world with (invisible) microbes, Pasteur made it a different place and forced us into a whole set of new hygienic practices (Latour 1993). By developing the idea of a "calling," Protestantism transferred our piety from chapels and churches into the world of mundane duties and obligations. Since Max Weber (1930/2001), we know that once taken by powerful actors, ideas can turn into a social force that influences all aspects of society. In the second section, I will discuss the specific concept of the "need" on which marketing is based and the revolution caused by making the "need" the driver of the economies. Viewed through a marketing lens, people became consumers, products – "bundle[s] of values" (Lancaster 1966), purchase acts – "values exchange[s]" (Kotler 1972), while "satisfying needs" turned into the "sole purpose of business" (Drucker 1973).

Within the frame of this founding insight – that what people buy are not products but the satisfaction of their needs – the whole system of actors and practices has emerged (Latour 1993). Clearly, in order to effectively cater to human needs, marketing must first discover, measure, and examine the needs; it must identify and select target groups, reach them with communication, and be heard; it must introduce its product onto a shop shelf with a well-designed brand and be noticed; finally, marketing must keep its finger on the pulse of social, cultural, and economic trends by their incessant monitoring. Therefore, marketing practice has resulted in the dynamic development and growth of retail and the media – both dependent on marketing investments – and simultaneously brought to life a whole set of "need-related industries," including research organizations, advertising agencies, media houses, PR specialists, events companies, and marketing consultancies. This huge and growing marketing-related ecosystem has now reached the size that is globally almost equal to the global investments in research and development (R&D; https://www.statista.com/statistics/1105959/total-research-and-development-spending-worldwide-ppp-usd/; accessed 23 August 2021). Marketing's sole purpose is "to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits her and sells itself. Ideally, marketing should result in a customer who is ready to buy" (Drucker 1973: 65). In other words, the marketing machinery is designed to drive consumption using "needs" as the motor of demand, thus making human needs instrumental toward business goals.

Scholars widely recognize the effectiveness of marketing in fuelling demand and, consequently, in growing markets and economies. Less obvious is the scope and ways in which marketing affects society. In the last section of this paper, I will discuss the influence on society of the key marketing tool: segmentation. According to Latour (2005), "there is no group without some kind of recruiting officer" (2005: 32), and without a spokesperson fighting "rather frantically to *de-fine* them. Their boundaries are marked, delineated, and rendered fixed and durable" (2005: 33). To exist, a group needs a differentiating criterion, however small or insignificant (the minimal intergroup experiments: Tajfel 1973) and a spokesperson "making the group boundaries hold" (Latour 2005: 33). This is exactly what marketing does, dividing "society" into segments, and advocating the existence of those selected as target groups. Bearing in mind the size of marketing investments in communication, we should consider marketers the powerful "recruiting officers" working to delimit "consumption communities" and hold their boundaries against contradictory pressures. There is no certainty what the status of segmentation is: whether the segments re-produced via statistical techniques are in any sense or to any degree "real," or are they just becoming real due to the marketing advocating their existence. Two questions are relevant here. The first concerns the ability of marketing to create groups or communities and support their existence. This is what is claimed by renowned marketing scientists (Boorstin 1973; Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan 2010; Kozinetz 1999; O'Guinn, Munitz 2001, 2004) and gurus (Lindstrom 2005; Mark, Pearson 2001): that in the postmodern world of fluidity and uprootedness, these are brands that assume the role of society-makers.

The second question is more general and concerns the impact of the multitude of segmentations that marketing specialists make using disproportionate criteria derived from the consumption of various goods or services, and then communicated back to narrowly defined "target groups." According to sociology, social differentiation emerges in the processes and mechanism of collective life, so we see an interdependence among the resulting social units like classes, strata, or categories. Target groups emerge in the frame of the thousands of independent segmentations performed by competing companies in hundreds of the markets.

In conclusion, I argue that the impact of marketing on society is much broader than only that of seducing people into excessive consumption or appropriating their work (Zwick et al. 2008): marketing affects the very foundations of our ability to lead collective life, undermining "the processes by which individuals are inducted into and induced to co-operate in some sort of corporate existence which we call society" (Park 1921: 1).

The Birth of Marketing

Researchers (Tedlow 1990; de Grazia 2005; Hernik 2014; Kamiński 2014; Kozielski 2013) generally agree that the modern form of marketing – a systematic practice supported by science – appeared in the United States of America at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At that time, a series of breakthrough innovations happened in the USA in almost all spheres of life, accompanied by the rising role of the USA in world politics and economy (Edelstein 2008).

However, the most crucial breakthrough was the technological change symbolized by Ford and the production line. When combined with scientific management, this technological advance engendered an unprecedented increase in productivity. Consequently, a growing mass of cheap goods hit the market, which for the first time in human history, resulted in the "consumer market." Mass production made the massification of consumption necessary – and possible – because the cost of production drops and thus allows prices to be lowered. People *had to buy more* to make the economy running, but they also *could buy more* as the American economic boom resulted in the increase of the "purchasing power" of the average American wage.

However, to reach mass consumers with masses of goods and to intensify the flow of products from producers to consumers, a new model of distribution was needed. With the long and complicated "pipeline" composed of a chain of wholesalers and ending up with a family shop at a corner, traditional trade was not efficient enough to deal with the increased supply. So there appeared another breakthrough innovation in the form of hypermarkets organized into the modern distribution chains. The first retail magnate, Edward Filene, defined a store as the "machine for selling" (de Grazia 2005: 87) organized in such a way as to maximize sales. Modern trade was able to take the weight of the mass production and was willing to do so. Since then, a fraction of the margin (profit) received from the producers to list their brands and put them onto the shelves provided the cash flow that enabled retailers to develop and grow. On the other side, retail paid producers to handle over a fraction of their margin to build sales. Today, the biggest retail chains act globally, with a few like Amazon (number 4), Alibaba (number 9) or Walmart (number 16) belonging to the top 20 most valuable companies as measured by market capitalization (https://www.statista.com/statistics/263264/top-companies-in-the-world-by-market-capitalization/: accessed 13 October 2021).

Hence, the second powerful actor entered the scene – retailers – with the interest in increasing sales. The third one was the mass media. With the exception of public outlets, the media make their living and grow by commercial investments in communication such as advertisements, product placement, or sponsoring. In a nutshell, the media make money on selling audiences, with the so-called "commercial target" (meaning consumers aged 16–49) being the most valuable one. The media compete for audiences as fiercely as retailers compete for shoppers and manufacturers for loyal users. As Sartori aptly notes, in the continuous process to optimise viewership, any worthwhile programming items are stripped from television schedules, and content is adapted to the expectations of the viewers. Sartori suggests that we are dealing here with a kind of vicious circle in which market offer and people's taste relentlessly drive each other down (Sartori 2007: 98).

These three actors jointly constitute "mass market," in which modern manufacturers produce mass products, big chains and large stores function as "machines for selling" (de Grazia 2005), and the mass media enables major brands to reach millions of people simultaneously.

However, what is still needed is for people to be encouraged to buy on a mass scale, thereby both increasing the number of buyers and the intensity of their buying behaviour. As Victor Lebow, an American retailing analyst, argues:

> Our enormously productive economy … demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption … We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate (Lebow 1955: 7).

Turning people into consumers is no trivial task. First, things have social life there: "India, in spite of a growing and status-hungry middle class, is not yet a "consumer society" in the Western sense. Thus, the materiality of objects in India is not yet completely penetrated by the logic of the market. That is to say, objects are not yet seen primarily as material repositories of monetary or exchange value. In the most advanced industrial economies, of which the United States is still in many ways the leader, objects have become fairly thoroughly colonized by the market" (Appudarai 2006: 18). Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood (2021) argue that consumption is primarily not a private means of satisfying individual needs, because goods compose a vital communication system, therefore "forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing and shelter: forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking: treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty" (Douglas, Isherwood 2021: 62). Second, acquiring things, using them, and then throwing them away have always been socially regulated behaviours. Things have social life and therefore have always been ethically marked as our faithful companions deserving respect and care (Szpakowska 2003).

To encourage consumption, it was necessary to dis-embed things from their social and metaphoric meaning and to soften many social, cultural, and psychological constraints that blocked people from satisfying their needs and wants as they were. This is where marketing enters the scene with two vital contributions: the *idea of the* "democracy of consumption" *and the tools to make that happen.*

The Founding Idea

Max Weber famously shown the role played by religion in the expansion of capitalism (1930/2001). Neither Protestantism nor capitalism was new. Prior to Protestantism, there had been religious schisms which were very close to the religious ideas proposed by Luther or Calvin, if only to mention Hussitism. Similarly, proto-capitalistic practices and motivations had first surfaced well before the sixteenth century. However, the revitalized religious idea had to encounter social actors able to recognize its potential to legitimize their economic practices before the expansion of capitalism could really begin. Since Weber, we know that emerging social practices cannot expand if they are not legitimized by a governing idea, while the latter can only prevail if fed by material practices and supported by powerful social actors.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the powerful actors like the manufacturers, the retail industry, and the media – with their new capacities – were seeking a trigger to increase consumption by liberating it from the norms of frugality. This was where legitimized by its scientific origin, marketing entered the stage with the idea of the "need" as the driving force of economy, allowing people to combine the interests of business with consumers. The founding insight was simple yet ingenious: people do not buy a good or service, they buy *the satisfaction of a need*. For the industry it meant that "business must start out with the needs, the realities, the values of the customer. … The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits her and sells itself. Ideally, marketing should result in a customer who is ready to buy" (Drucker 1973: 64–65). For people, it meant that they were offered products designed to satisfy their needs in the process of "value exchange" (Kotler 1972). The manufacturer producing goods in a service to consumers and the consumer paying for their perceived value – both parties satisfy their needs in the act of economic exchange, thus contributing to the individual and collective well-being.

An inherently positive image of business has resided in this concept, which has been consistent with the value of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs in American culture. The further strengthening of the social position of business came from another important social innovation of that time – Rotary Clubs – meaning associations of local businessmen devoted to support their local communities under the claim "Service above Self." The social involvement of Rotary Clubs in solving local problems – street lighting, sewage, or childcare – supported the vision of business caring for people and made the idea of serving consumer needs plausible. Rotary Clubs soon went international, establishing clubs in Canada and then Europe and engaging in global humanitarian action (Tadajewski 2015); although Europe stayed more distrustful towards the social orientation of business.

Also in the light of mainstream economic theories consumption was a beneficial and rational undertaking both for individual people and for the economy as a whole. Summing up all those threads: it was right and good to encourage people to consume. "Consumption" became the component of GDP measurement (Lepenies 2016), but it also became one of the key indices of the quality of life measurement.

In this context, we should note the initiative of the International Labour Organization to prepare a comparative survey of the quality of life of blue-collar workers in the USA and selected European countries (de Grazia 2005). The survey was sponsored by Henry Ford and Edward Filene, and the key controversy between American and European experts concerned the indices to be used to measure the quality of life. American specialists insisted on using such indices as disposable income, purchasing power, or consumer goods ownership, which was hardly acceptable for the Europeans who wanted to include rather such variables as the quality of family relations or relations at the workplace. Finally, the American consumption-oriented definition was used (de Grazia 2005).

Apart from being portrayed as the contribution to individual well-being, consumption was also interpreted as the manifestation of democracy: everybody has the right to satisfy their needs, to make choices according to one's preferences (freedom), and to have choice. Consumption gained scientific and ethical legitimization, which was far from the principles of Benjamin Franklin, whose "worldly Protestant asceticism … acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries (Weber 2001: 115).

Let us emphasize that the idea of people buying values and not goods was by no means trivial. To give a few examples, according to this insight people do not buy a washing powder, but cleanliness for their clothes; it is not fuel that travellers need but the freedom to drive wherever they want; not a door lock – but a sense of security. And this is what should be offered or promised to consumers: cleanliness, freedom, security. Let us notice that these are deeply and inherently social, psychological, and cultural notions, shaped in the processes of long duration and saturated with meanings and values. To take the first example, "cleanliness" has originally been an aesthetic and then ethical notion (Vigarello 1996), which still sends us back to the concepts of purity, innocence, or rightness (Douglas 2007). "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," as the British proverb says, which serves as a social and psychological indicator of social standing, of staying in control, having healthy family relations, and being in a good psychological condition (Giza 2017). "Cleanliness" is a complex bundle of values, norms, and meanings, rooted in culture and history and constantly changing in the social process of re-production and interpretation. In general, from the viewpoint of sociology, "needs" are shaped, negotiated, distributed, and legitimized socially (Sulkunen 2009) – as are preferences (Bourdieu 2006). After all, marketing is very simplistic and superficial: it neglects all the underlying processes and meanings and frames "need" in relation to the functional and emotional features of a product that provide cleanliness. To give an example, whatever the internalized value and inner conflicts related to "cleanliness" (Kaufmann 2004), a product can be offered with "intelligent molecules" removing even the worst stains to make a blouse impeccably while (functional benefit), which is to increase self-assurance during important social occasions (emotional benefit).

There are two points to be made here. Firstly, "need" as conceived by marketing is extracted from the social fabrics: it is an individual desire here and now, without social history or role. Marketing does not judge or evaluate "needs," apart from assessing their economic value. The leading idea here is that an individual has the right to buy whatever they want or need with their money. Market offer should be designed according to consumer will and preferences, not based on social norms or criteria of taste; which by the way, is the instance of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2006). Designed this way, products "embody" and communicate respect for individual rights and liberties. Marketing does not require or demand from people to work on themselves or qualify their desires against social ideals. The difference between the two approaches is very aptly verbalized by Jack Valenti, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America: "we dominate world screens not because of armies, bayonets, or nuclear bombs, but because what we are exhibiting on foreign screens is *what the people of those countries want to see*" (de Grazia 2005 : 284). The same thesis was put forward by Drucker when explaining the source of the attractiveness of American brands (Drucker 1957). What is hidden beneath the democracy of consumption is the democracy of needs.

Secondly, "need" is taken in isolation from other needs and related to specific product features. Each marketer looks only into one category of products, seeking underlying insights and needs: beer marketers only consider beer-related needs, and shaving foam marketers only focus on shaving-related needs. As a result, consumers are split into a growing collection of unrelated needs, and society is split into thousands of unrelated target groups or segments: traditional beer lovers, new men, happy-go-luckies, progressive enterpreneurs, and thousands of others who are not linked to any common mechanism of collective life. The mechanism underlying the creation of "target groups" is solely the market competition between companies, functioning ad hoc and without any long-term logic.

On 10 July 1916, the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, spoke at the First Sales Congress to a room full of salesmen. At that time, the USA was faced with the need to make an important decision: whether to join the First World War – and thus take a key seat in the future peace talks – or let the European powers continue a fight to the death. The ongoing war sparked an economic boom in the USA – which was providing the Entente Powers with credit – raising the USA to the position of the greatest economic power, responsible for two-thirds of global industrial production (Skrzypek 2009).

In his speech, President Wilson spoke at length about "business democracy" and its ability to peacefully conquer the world by combining salesmanship and statesmanship: a truly statesmanlike salesman would not impose his taste on anyone but, instead, would strive to produce goods the customer wants rather than what he himself wants; he would try to keep up with the customer and would get to know them. Woodrow Wilson's final message was:

> "let your thoughts and your imagination run abroad throughout the whole world, and with the inspiration of the thought that you are Americans and are meant to carry liberty and justice and the principles of humanity wherever you go, go out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America" (de Grazia 2005: 2).

The speech was indeed prophetic:

> "American consumption culture" gained visibility and recognition while maintaining that a good life for the majority of people entails earning a decent income and spending it in accordance with their individual preferences on goods that they believe will enable them to enjoy a comfortable life. The American standard was defined using scientific measurements combining such indicators as wage levels, purchasing power, production growth and the availability of alternatives (choices) provided by private enterprises" (de Grazia 2005: 94).

And the key to the success of American goods has been their ability to create consumers from whom the burden of limitations and requirements are removed, placing them in the position in which they are being offered exactly what they want. The legitimization of consumption is a great communication task that has sparked a social revolution and become a sine qua non of the success of marketing as a system. To effectively bring about this revolution, businesses must combine their forces, and new actors must be created and engaged. Thus, a powerful ecosystem of practices and entities has emerged.

The Marketing Ecosystem

Marketing is not an isolated function: it is the philosophy that "encompasses the entire business" (Drucker 1973: 67). To implement a marketing strategy, a company must restructure its inner organization according to the principle of subordinating all activities to the ultimate goal of "making customer ready to buy" (1973: 67). This requires reversing the flow of all processes by starting with the consumers and then working back to the product, instead of starting from products and then endeavouring to sell them. Before the marketing era, the key positions in companies belonged to the engineers in R&D departments and the sales force. When marketing departments emerged, they dethroned the former from their position of primacy by monopolizing the function of bridging the gap between the external world of consumer needs and companies' capacities and resources, while also ensuring there is a feedback loop between the outside world and the company. Since then, the marketing department has taken the managerial role, giving briefs to other departments (including R&D), organizing internal cooperation, and ensuring that its company meets "the needs of its consumer at a profit" (Kotler 1972). Noteworthy, this leads to the transformation of a need identified into a need that can be profitably satisfied in terms of resources, production capacity, and potential margin. Quite often consumers receive a proxy that presented as a bundle of values they originally wanted.

The new process may be presented in a slightly simplified form as follows. First, consumer research begins to identify – within the context of market trends and competition – segments that are relatively profitable and "available," meaning they have (some) unsatisfied needs and represent some commercial potential. Then, the concept for a product or service satisfying the identified needs and targeted at the segment in question is developed and tested. The next step is to brief R&D to check whether the company can deliver against the promise, namely create and produce such a product. What follows is a calculation made to check whether and how soon investment in the product's development and production would make economic sense. Having ascertained the numbers, the marketing department lobbies the board for a budget. If that budget is granted, a prototype is developed and tested, advertising and PR agencies are briefed to develop communication channels, the sales department negotiates with key retailers, the company buys media space and agrees promotions with retailers, sales are monitored and evaluated against a business case study, and the product is either backed or rejected.

However simplistic, this description allows us to identify the new actors (roles, functions) emerging inside companies and the new balance of forces. Market research departments emerge alongside media planning and competitor intelligence departments. In turn, engineers lose their prestige and are reduced to the implementers of consumer fads and foibles. The status and role of sales departments also changes, resulting in the inevitable tension between sales and marketing. If the sales are below expectations, their supervisors question whether this is due to the poor marketing mix or the low performance of the sales force. As marketing splits into categories of products and brands, the inner competition for budgetary funds starts provoking additional tensions.

However, new internal actors need service providers and partners out in the wider world. Thus, marketing brings to life an entire ecosystem of external entities with their specific practices, whose most visible are research agencies, advertising companies, and PR agencies, consulting firms, media houses, event agencies, and faculties or institutes focused on marketing science. The practices developed to provide relevant insights, concepts, communications, events, analyses, and measurements involve millions of actors around the world. Besides employees and freelancers who work for the "need industry," there are consumers studied in all possible ways: from simplistic surveys to brain monitoring with tomographs; hostesses, journalists, influencers and other Internet-related actors (e.g. Internet community managers), sportsmen and sportswomen providing exposure for brand names; even "ordinary" people turned into "living billboards" with branded clothing items; there are also plenty of nonhuman actors, such as sports premises, billboards, and branded vending machines.

That whole ecosystem is growing in size and value. The value of the annual global turnover for market research and insights stood at USD 80 billion in 2018, compared to USD 76 billion in 2017 (https://www.researchworld.com/esomars-latest-global-market-research-report-values-global-research-and-data-industry-market-at-us-80-billion/, accessed 23 August 2021), while the global advertising market hit the value of USD 647 billion in 2020, with expectations of further growth at the capital annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.2% in 2021–2026 (https://www.imarcgroup.com/global-advertising-market, accessed 23 August 2021). All in all, the size of the global marketing industry was estimated in 2019 to be USD 1.7–1.8 trillion annually, and trending towards further expansion, although at a slower pace (Redburn and PWC report:https://www.redburn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/190129-BTL-Press-Release.pdf; accessed 23 August 2021). In comparison, global investments in R&D reached ca. USD 2.3 trillion (at purchasing power parity) in 2018: (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1105959/total-research-and-development-spending-worldwide-ppp-usd/; accessed 23 August 2021). These numbers are close to each other, although obviously USD 0.4–0.5 trillion is a significant amount.

Many people and a significant share of GDP depend on the marketing industry, which makes that industry resistant to reduction. Hence, the more the contribution of marketing-related industries to GDP grows, the more necessary marketing becomes: the collapse of the financial markets' faith in a brand not only results in a drop in the share prices of leading corporations but also a collapse in the advertising agency sector (Klein 2000). Moreover, this also changes how existing industries like the media and retail operate and even transform the urban landscape through outdoor advertising.

The ecosystem in question has also transformed the powerful external partners indispensable to reaching of consumers' minds (the media) and their shopping baskets (retail). Producers depend on distribution and communication channels, but the reverse is also true.

The power of retail chains is constantly growing, as measured by the aggregate retail revenue of the top retail chains, the share they have of total trade, and the market value of retailers' brands. Allow me to offer some illustrative data. The aggregate retail revenue of the top 250 retailers hit a value of USD 4.85 trillion in 2019; with Walmart alone reaching USD 524 billion with the prospect of growing further (https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/at/Documents/consumer-business/at-global-powers-retailing-2021.pdf; accessed 24 August 2021). The percentage share of the top 10 modern grocery retail chains in 2019 – so before the pandemic – varied depending on the region: from 48.7 (Western Europe, with Denmark leading, at the level of more than 90%), through 37.8 (Central and East Europe, with the Czech Republic leading) to 28.3 in Latin America. And finally, the 50 most valuable brands in 2020 included Amazon (No. 2), Walmart (No. 19), Home Depot (No. 34), Ikea (No. 40), and Zara (No. 41; https://www.forbes.com/the-worlds-most-valuable-brands/#6a438fd3119c; accessed 25 August 2021).

I do not have the space in this article to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the growth of e-retailers, or how retail chains are using the data they collect, so I will focus instead on the relationship between producers and retailers. From that perspective, the growth of retail chains depends heavily on the margin negotiated with producers, i.e. the difference between the price paid to a producer and the price charged to consumers in-store. The greater the chain's strength, the more effectively it can wrestle a respectable margin from producers and force them into manufacturing "distributors' own brands" (DOBs). As a matter of fact, manufacturing for a chain is akin to self-defeat. After all, DOBs constitute dangerous and increasing competition for manufacturers of branded goods. Marlboro Friday (April 2, 1993) has passed into the annals of marketing lore: Philip Morris, in the face of dynamic growth among generic competitors, cut the price of all its brands by 20% (see Sellers, Erdman 1993). In response *The Wall Street Journal* declared brands dead, shares in corporations producing FMCG tumbled, and the stock index fell by 1.98%; further delayed consequences led to the collapse of the advertising industry (Klein 2000). Once begun, this process does not leave the main actors with any real choice. Producers must "feed" distributors, and in turn, the latter must grow because of shareholders' and financial markets' expectations.

The same co-dependence occurs between producers and media: marketing needs the media to communicate with consumers, and the media need advertising expenses to finance their activities and development. Much like in the case of retail, it is marketing investments in communication that allow the media to proliferate, thus increasing the expenses needed to reach the same target. To give an example: in Poland of 1990 one could reach with only one (public) TV broadcaster almost all commercial targets by airing an ad between the news and the weather forecast. Today, there are more than 50 TV broadcasters, not to mention radio and online outlets. Media proliferation has scattered the target groups to which advertising is addressed, leading to an increase in advertising spending. Therefore, the advertising market has been constantly growing, and marketing is looking for ever-newer ways to reach the consumer. The global media market was estimated to be worth USD 1712.96 billion in 2020, and it is expected to grow in value to $1850.04 billion in 2021, at the CAGR of 8%, with major companies including Google, Walt Disney, Time Warner, Facebook, and Comcast Corporation, and with revenues from advertisements contributing ca. 52% to the total (https://www.researchandmarkets.com, accessed 25 August 2021).

There are two points to be made at this juncture. Firstly, more than USD 1 trillion is being annually invested in making consumers "ready to buy." Second, the weapon used to extract useful information about habits, emotions, meanings, values, and so on includes the most sophisticated tools of science: market research results are tested on real markets, and research providers compete quite heavily, which significantly raises the level of their expertise.

A Society of Target Groups

There is vast literature on the consumption in the modern and post-modern world, both on the positive and critical sides. On the positive side, brands and consumption are theorized as the response to the erosion of the former types of social ties and sociality: common consumption interests are presented as the social force crystalizing communities around brands, (sub)cultures or tribes in the sense Maffesoli (1996) has given to it (see e.g. Belk, Costa 1998; Cova 1997; Kozinets 2001; Muniz, O'Guinn, 2001). The thesis about the socio-creative role of consumption was formulated for the first time by Daniel Boorstin. In his book (1973) he argued that, especially in the United States – a country created by immigrants uprooted from their traditional communities – the use of the same products, and later brands, allowed people to recognize similar ones, and thus to create a common identity and social bond. Although, in the USA, communities congregating around similar consumer choices appeared earlier than in other sociocultural contexts, Boorstin considered such communities to be a universal phenomenon. He argued that increased mobility, urbanization, and changes in the pace of life necessitate the disintegration of traditional neighbourhoods and communities. At the same time, Boorstin stressed the role that marketing plays in the production of consumption communities: "nationwide advertisers of branded goods and services kept telling their audience that by buying their products they could join a selected group – and millions of Americans wanted to join" (Boorstin 1973: 147). Few decades later Muniz and O'Guinn claim that in the fluid postmodern world brands take the role of society-makers:

brands are not trivial to human existence. As branded things grew more important in people's lives and consumption more central to everyday life, community did not subside, but began to coalesce around them. The importance of this should not be underestimated. […] Brands are not just names of marketed things, but increasingly part of social fabric, increasingly centres of social organization, and obviously socially embedded things. Our models, our thinking, and our practice need to catch up with this reality (Muniz, O'Guinn 2001: 33–34).

On the critical side, the social power of marketing is the subject of the critical cultural studies of marketing and management practices (e.g. Terranova 2000; Reed 2005; Ritzer, 2004; Zwick et al. 2008). "Putting consumers at the centre" to serve and cater for their needs is theorized as putting them to work for the sake of industry and economy. Marody (2021: 47) suggests compulsion to consume is in fact the contemporary form of exploiting masses of what we can call "proletariat of consumption". As Ritzer (2004) observed, many forms of rationalization processes of companies in the "McDonaldizing" world involve putting consumers to unpaid work: in self-service restaurants customers do the job of waiters or cleaning staff, while the automated teller machine (ATM) "allows everyone to work, for at least a few moments, as an unpaid bank teller" (Ritzer 2004: 63). Nowadays the appropriation of unpaid consumer work has taken the new form and reached the higher level with the new marketing ideas of co-creation and pro-sumption, although "both of these labels contain as their central idea that control over consumers and markets can best be achieved by providing managed and dynamic *platforms for consumer practice*, which on the one hand free the creativity and know-how of consumers, and on the other channel these consumer activities in ways desired by the marketers" (Zwick et al. 2008: 165). The new vision of market is proclaimed, with consumers and producers jointly working on innovative products and services: "this way, the post-Fordist production process directly exploits the communitarian dimension of social life' (Arvidsson 2005: 241).

However the impact of marketing on society is evaluated and theorized, the question is: how marketing influences consumers so as to create communities, encourage practices or offer social identities? In other words, what are the means and channels to "coalesce" consumers around brands or engage them into the unpaid labour?

Here is where segmentation enters the scene. We should bear in mind that for a marketer, "society" is a number of actual or potential consumers with varying needs, habits and preferences that underly market choices and make up distinct consumption patterns. The task is to identify those patterns together with the features of consumers who display them, and at the same time to identify the differentiating factors that separate groups of consumers from each other.

The idea is to get to the disjoint and exhaustive division: to the set of groups (segments) that are homogenous internally and differ one from the other. One of these groups is then selected as the "target" to be reached with a branded good or market offer.

As marketing itself, segmentations has started as a series of practical attempts (Tedlow 1990), to be then conceptualized into the scientific concept by Wendell R. Smith (1956). The theory and practice of segmentation changes over time, both as a result of the market dynamics and social trends (Tedlow 1990) and due to the development of the new, advanced statistical tools to conduct segmentation. What remains the same is the fundamental role of segmentation as the basis for the strategy known as "segmentation – targeting – positioning" (STP), in which "market segmentation divides a market into well-defined slices" of "customers who share a similar set of needs" (Kotler, Keller 2012: 268). Targeting selects the group that is "substantial" (worth going after with a tailored marketing mix), and "positioning is the act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of the target market" (Kotler, Keller 2012: 297). Therefore, the process progresses as follows. A needs-based segment is given an identity based on its distinctive features and labelled (e.g. "traditional beer lovers" or "progressive housewives"). Then, an offering is communicated back in such a way that target group members can recognize themselves and feel the offering somehow matches their requirements. Briefly speaking, during this process, a statistically produced "target group" is re-presented to its statistically identified members as if it were real.

There are three important issues to be discussed at this point: the nature of segmentation, the impact of communicating target groups to themselves and the disproportionality between various segmentations.

Segmentation starts with the assumption that there are segments of consumers who make similar choices due to some underlying features that they share: e.g. men who prefer cheap beer brands from local breweries live in small towns and on relatively low income; or women who use to buy a certain hair care brand are extravert and aware of their worth. Based on this assumption, analysts look for segments in the data gathered, using various statistical tools and experimenting with variables. Leaving for a moment this issue aside, it is important to note that the very existence of segments (disjoint and exhaustive) is the part of the marketing paradigm or the model of the world. In the marketing world, there must be segments.

Moreover, the data gathered to run segmentation are also based on the assumptions concerning what are/can be important and differentiating criteria: in a-priori segmentations they come from theory (e.g. Mark, Pearson 2001), but in the post-hoc ones they are driven by marketers past experiences, current beliefs or even business strategy or organizational resources (Mason, Kjellberg, Hagberg

2018). As it is often stressed in strategic papers, marketers should understand and know their segments before measuring them – from qualitative research, or from social and demographic trends (Fogel, Hailey 2011). The second important note is that the marketers assume not only the existence of segments, but also their nature, which translates into the selection of questions and indicators. What's more: researchers also point out the performative – in contrast to the normative – aspect of segmentation: "Prior to segmentation, consideration should be given to the infrastructure of organization (corporate culture, senior leadership, project champions and mentors, and communication plan), resources (funds, time and commitment, and trained and skilled personnel), and approach adopted (learn from previous mistakes, decide coverage, and optimize project timing). […] During the process of segmentation, marketers should focus on ensuring that the segmentation maximizes the opportunities of the market, resources are available, and the communication within the organization supports the marketing efforts" (Fogel, Hailey 2011: 122). The perfomative aspect of segmentation arouses interest of many researchers: how segmentation is "accomplished in practice has yet to be fully articulated" (Venter, Wright, Dibb 2018) while "the empirical investigation of how segmentation decisions are actually conducted by firms in business practice has not been a major focus of extant research" (Foedermayr, Diamantopoulos 2008).

So this is when it comes to the input to the segmentation. The next step is the choice of an appropriate statistical method for the segmentation, and this again depends on a number of factors including, the broad approach (a priori or post hoc), the availability of data, time constraints, the marketer's skill level, and resources (Myers 1996). Statistical approaches and techniques used in segmentation analysis include among others clustering algorithms – overlapping, non-overlapping and fuzzy methods; e.g. K-means or other cluster analysis – factor analysis or principal components analysis, Latent Class Analysis, logistic regression, multidimensional scaling and many others (Beane, Ennis 1987). There are two points to be made here. First, the results – or the segments obtained – vary depending on the method used. And second, in all cases researchers experiment with data looking for the best or most reasonable set of segments. The point is that the segments obtained are partly discovered and partly created: their ontological status is dubious as we cannot be sure whether segments (or target groups) really exist (whatever it means) and to what extent they exist. For sure, they lack the crucial condition of becoming a "real" group: the sense of belonging, "We – identity".

While analysing the way financial markets function, Knorr-Cetina introduced the concept of "scopic systems" (from the Greek *scopos*, "purpose"): the frame or viewpoint that organizes how we perceive reality. The scopic system of financial markets collects and synthesizes dispersed events (e.g. traders' actions) and visualizes them on screens in the form of indices. As a result, “the market is fully visible on the screen” (Knorr-Cetina 2006: 155), and this representation becomes the basis for decisions. Consequently, irrespective of whether the world seen through the scopic system was originally “real,” it becomes real as traders and other actors treat it that way and act as if it was real. There is also a broad ongoing debate on the surveying practices as a mechanism for producing society (Halawa 2013; Igo 2008; Moore 2008; Noelle-Neumann 2004; Sułek 2001, 2006, 2010; Szwed 2011). Mass society – as opposed to the small communities – has no direct means to know itself. To make its members aware of belonging to this kind of “big society” and to spread knowledge about its features and qualities researches, “symbolic middlemen” (Bauman 2001) and media are necessary. But, as Halawa points out referring to Knorr-Cetina, irrespective of whether society seen through the scopic system was originally “real,” it becomes real as more and more social actors take it as if it was. Society is based on reflectivity: on defining situation, making assumptions as to the actions of others, “taking for granted” social reality. That is why surveys contribute not only to the common knowledge (Chwe 2003), but also translate into action:

> the statistical production of society is effective because surveying practices are widespread and repeated based on the same assumptions over and over again. Behind them are significant networks of epistemic communities talking and caring about society, and the media that describe society with research findings. With each poll findings communicated, this statistically constructed society becomes more real – until it finally appears to be a mirror shaped in a process of ‘society’ and its statistical models referring to each other” (Halawa 2013: 48).

Marketing is the scopic system, and its main tool – segmentation – is based on the statistical means to (re) produce society as seen by marketing lens (i.e. consumption segments). Target groups once “discovered”, defined and accepted by the organization are communicated back to themselves through the carefully selected channels. Initially, they are merely statistical aggregates forced out of the data by the means of statistics. With the size of marketing budgets, they can quite easily become such a self-confirming or self-fixing mirror, as marketers take the role of a “recruiting officer” advocating their existence, features and boundaries. They have at their disposal the whole range of resources and tools: targeted communication, promotion, brand activation, managing communities of users (real or virtual). “Target group” is communicated, described, talked to, portrayed and represented by multiple means: messages, images, tonality, colours etc. reach consumers from many directions and in many forms simultaneously. The same concerns demographic, social or cultural trends: once identified, they are used as the vehicle for brand growth populating the world with the images of new fathers, energetic 60+ or self-conscious women. It is hard to say whether "segments" or "trends" utilized in brand building are totally fabricated or only transformed with selected features boosted: it depends on the solidity of the data, skills of researchers and many other factors. Quite often it works. O'Guinn and Muniz (2004) analyze an on-line Mazda Miata on-line community post: "*Truth be told, I just "found" this group and I'm a happy little person now that I've found there are other people out there like me that love their Miatas!"*, concluding that "this verbatim reveals language of someone being happy because they realized that there are others just like them…out there…who get it…who see what they see. The promise of community…not to be alone…to share adoration…no matter how odd or inappropriate others feel it to be, is revealed here" (p. 9).

What is worth noting is, however, the size of the budgets invested into replying target groups back to themselves, so that they can recognize themselves, feel emotionally attached, engage in brand co-creation and finally build their social identity. It is hard to estimate the total investment in playing back to society specific groups or trends, but advertising itself involves huge amounts of money: e.g. McDonald's spent approximately 654.7 million U.S. dollars on advertising worldwide in 2020, up from 447.3 million the previous year (https://www.statista.com/statistics/286448/largest-global-advertisers/, accessed 28 October 2021). Anheuser-Busch (the world's largest brewer) claiming that "*Our Dream is to be the Best Beer Company Bringing People Together For a Better World*!", spent in United States alone 1.53 billion U.S. dollars on advertising in 2019 (Nelson 2005).

However, the real breakthrough in advocating target groups existence turned out to be the development of the Internet, especially the Web 2.0 and social media. Apart from real brand communities such as Harley Davidson clubs, modern technologies facilitated the emergence of virtual communities that possess an immeasurably greater range and many more possibilities for interaction than the more traditional face-to-face communities. The power of such platforms to reach and engage consumers resides not only in their ability to group "fans" and simultaneously materialize brands (e.g. in the form of a Facebook profile, discussion group, or blog) but also in the completely new opportunities they provide for animating and strengthening communities that gather around entities existing only in the virtual world. Hence the new marketing gospel of co-creation and presumption, "this latest business buzz that urges marketing managers to use customers as a source of competence and put them to work" (Zwick et al. 2006: 164). Marketing can thus easily become a "social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (Arnould, Thompson 2005).

Finally, the point must be made concerning the scope of "segmenting" and "targeting" society: thousands of disproportionate segmentations are independently prepared by various firms, product categories, brands, and so on, and the only mechanism behind is market competition. "Society" get thus dismantled into bits and pieces that do not come together to re-assemble the whole (Latour 2005). At the same time, the mechanisms and processes "by which individuals are inducted into and induced to co-operate in some sort of corporate existence which we call society" (Park 1921) get disarmed and canceled: social control and legitimization of needs and wants, self-control, social values giving life and meaning to things and consumption. It is hard to estimate how big is the role of "targeting society" in the processes of fragmentation and uprooting, which, paradoxically, marketing presents as the problem they solve with their brands. As O'Guinn and Munitz note, society's need for trust (Cook 2001) and security (Bauman 2001) can be effectively satisfied by brand communities especially that consumers are in control there.

Conclusions

For a sociologist, "society" is a complex and multi-layered concept, referring on the most general level to a number of individuals leading collective life, connected by a network of relations and mutual dependencies, sharing a set of vital resources– from territory, through public goods and commons, to institutional infrastructure and culture. There is an age-old controversy as to the nature of "society", but there is also an agreement as to its fundamental qualities. First, "society" is a living entity lasting from one generation to the next, with its own history and heritage of culture, habits, artefacts, institutions and memories. Second, "society" is based on reflectivity, however small it can be – like in the case of traditional (Weber 1922, 1978) or habitual (Kaufmann 2004) actions. Making assumptions as to the actions of others – the essence of social action – requires shared categories of cognition (Durkheim 1916/1965) and common knowledge (Chwe 2003). There is no "society" without culture[1] or – in the words of Znaniecki (1971) – axionormative structure underlying all interactions and social practices. The ability to lead collective life is grounded

[1] There are numerous definitions of culture – here I refer to the triadic or three dimensional concepts of culture (subject – symbol – object) present in the theories of F. Znaniecki, G.H.Mead, S. Czarnowski and summarized in the concise definition authored by A. Kłoskowska: "culture is a multi-faceted entirety, in which, through analysis, we can distinguish an internalised stratum of norms, formulas and values lying in the consciousness of people; a stratum of actions being the objectivised expression of that sphere, a stratum of creations of such activities or other objects becoming the objects of cultural actions". (Kłoskowska, 1991, pp. 23–24).

in “moral coercion” (Durkheim 1982), “moral sentiments” (Smith 1989) or fundamental trust (Luhmann 2017). And finally, social structures and units of all kinds and levels emerge through the mechanisms of collective life (Narojek 1980), economic exchange – or market – being only one of them.

The “society of marketers” is an aggregate of target groups extracted by means of segmentation. However, as segmentations are created independently and based on disproportionate criteria, they gradually transform society into a pulsating set of unrelated “target groups.” While the society of sociologists is rooted in history, as a whole functioning within a common institutional framework, the “consumer society” is more of a kaleidoscope in which – once shaken – individual elements form new patterns. Notably, the plasticity of the obtained systems is possible only on the condition that the elements that constitute them are not permanently rooted in any substrate, and the individual elements do not actually have any identity of their own other than the one they acquire within the context of various segmentations.

It is difficult to decide whether brands are *filling the void* resulting from the abdication of the rational homo economicus and the self-aware heir of the Enlightenment or, conversely, whether they are *creating this void* by cancelling out past pressures and social constraints. However, the most likely conclusion that can be drawn is that these two processes seem to combine to create a spiral, in which trends unleashed by marketing are combined with trends that arise independently of the former, such as urbanization, changes in the labour market, the aging of societies, or structural individualization. The mechanism of this spiral is self-reinforcing: for example, marketing recognizes individualization as an important trend on which to build a market strategy; this strategy acts as if consumers are motivated by the pursuit of individualization and presents them to themselves as individualizing, thereby strengthening and accelerating that trend. Ortega y Gasset regards the changes he himself participated in as a harbinger of the id’s triumph over the superego – “a premonition of the dominance of unrestrained desires over the restrictions subordinating individuals to the superior social whole” (Marody 2021: 48).

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