

# The quest for marketing

*By Kevin Mellet*

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**How should marketing be studied? Thibault Le Texier adopts an approach centered on the genesis and diffusion of marketing rationality. But other scholars in the social sciences view marketing differently.**

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Reviewed: Thibault Le Texier, *La main visible des marchés. Une histoire critique du marketing* (The Visible Hand of Markets: A Critical History of Marketing). Paris, Éditions La Découverte 2022, 656 p., 26 €.

Marketing is everywhere. Yet it is also elusive, even as it expands its dominion over us. What *is* marketing? Where does it begin and where does it end? How was it created, disseminated, and imposed? Who are its professionals and specialists? How do they influence the economy and society?

As capitalism's armed fist and "the visible hand of markets," marketing would seem to be an essential cog in the commercial machine, organizing and facilitating the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. Questioning marketing is obviously a contemporary concern, at a time when the climate crisis necessitates the challenge of restraint and the expansion of digital networks and massive collections of personal data gives ever greater power to marketing's forces.

## Strengths and limits of marketing reason

In *La main visible des marchés* (The Visible Hand of the Market), Thibault Le Texier offers, over the course of 600 pages and 25 chapters, a critical history of marketing. His story is centered on what he calls "marketing rationality"--that is, a "coherent system of prescriptive knowledges" (p. 13) whose genesis, distinctive logic, and diffusion he examines. Le Texier focuses his story on the United States, and the ways in which these knowledges have been codified, structured, and prescribed, primarily in university textbooks.

The first three chapters deal with the genesis of marketing rationality. In the nineteenth century, "home marketing" handbooks gathered together suggestions, directed at housewives, for finding one's way around a supply of goods that was increasingly diversified but whose quality was far from certain. At the turn of the century, "agrarian marketing" handbooks targeted sellers of farm products (both agriculture and livestock) who needed outlets for their surpluses and supplied the markets that had become accessible thanks to new roads and rail infrastructure. The knowledge arising from agrarian marketing was then systematized, formalized, and applied to all commercial services, resulting in the creation of "modern marketing." According to Le Texier, "since the 1920s, marketing rationality has expanded its domain, but it has changed little" (p. 71).

The subsequent chapters abandon chronology for a thematic approach. Le Texier shows, in the first place, that marketing rationality requires us to rethink consumers (chapters 4 to 7), products (chapters 8 to 12), and the various networks connecting them (chapters 13 to 19). Marketing rationality integrates the many mediations that seek to bring consumer demand and producers' supply closer together, as markets multiply and expand. Le Texier next considers how some marketing theorists endowed it with an expansionist mission. Attempts to introduce marketing into domains as varied as politics, non-profit organizations, and the marketing of the "self" are examined in turn (chapters 20 to 22).

Two major claims emerge from this book. First, marketing rationality has managed to inspire, connect, improve the flow, and harmonize a vast range of products, circuits, and consumers, to the point that these different elements, having been brought together, now constitute a system. By "marketing system," Le Texier means "the general organization of society for the purpose of ensuring an ample flow of goods between producers and consumers who are far from one another" (p. 418). In

this system, the strength of marketing rationality depends less on its ability to guide and even manipulate consumer choice than on providing "supply actors" (that is, producers and salesmen) with the means to act on markets without appearing to do so. Marketing's "ruse" is to promote the idea that "the consumer is king," yielding to consumer choice the better to attract draw it in. For Le Texier, "marketing is a subordinate power, a servile power: it achieves its maximum effectiveness when it places itself--or appears to place itself--at its subjects' service" (p. 103).

The author's second claim is that marketing rationality struggles to impose itself beyond its original purview--the trade in goods and services. For Le Texier, marketing rationality travels poorly. In this way, it differs from managerial rationality, which he studies elsewhere (Le Texier, 2011): "throughout the twentieth century, marketing theorists have conspired to universalize the business model by applying their concepts all over the place--like management theorists, but less successfully" (p. 486). Marketing rationality, Le Texier maintains, cannot be easily transplanted outside of private companies and commercial relations, as evidenced by political marketing, which, despite aggressive efforts to promote it, has not managed to impose its concepts in the political and public domain, save for a few sub-domains such as regional marketing. Similarly, attempts to graft marketing rationality on non-profit institutions (such as universities), or personal development and career management, have failed. Le Texier sees this as evidence that critical perspectives on marketing are misguided: "A critical literature has flourished that denounces, in alarmist terms, the power of the market: it suggests that everything is for sale, love and happiness, bodily organs and diplomas. In fact, this is not so" (p. 462).

## **The invisible hand of marketing rationality**

The book's key concept is "rationality." By focusing on university textbooks and prescriptive knowledge, Le Texier is examining what is known--drawing on Max Weber--as formal rationalization, namely, the systematic elaboration of knowledge in ways that contribute to the constitution and autonomy of a field. Once Le Texier gets to the point when this trend towards formal rationalization was achieved (around 1920, in his view), the focus of his book shifts to the diffusion of this rationality in various social and economic spheres. Yet university textbooks are a far from reliable sources for describing these mechanisms, which involve a wide range of actions, institutions, and levels of intervention. The textbook models are also likely to run up

against concurrent rationalization processes. These processes of social transformation and reconstruction, which partake in a Weberian approach to material rationalization, are mostly missing from the book. Of course, Le Texier does show that marketing knowledge, when it has stabilized and achieved a coherent form, provides commercial relationships with material support. Yet marketing rationality, in his account, seems to impose itself by its own initiative, hovering over commercial exchanges that it renders fluid by harmoniously aligning circuits, products, and consumers.<sup>1</sup>

Yet formal rationality alone is not sufficient. It needs advocates. University professors--whom Le Texier studies in chapters 23 through 25--are not alone in contributing to the promotion and diffusion of codified knowledge. Other actors include professional associations and public institutions (Chessel, 1998; Chessel & Pavis, 2001), trade-specific journalists (Cochoy, 2014) and more or less formal coalitions. In *Le siècle américain* (The American Century), Olivier Zunz (2000) shows that the development of marketing in the United States occurred in a particular historical context, when the economic and social model was being recreated and the market and consumption were assigned the task of fostering social inclusion and integration. This project was embraced by a network of actors, including academics, businesspeople, and politicians, under the auspices--and with the financial support--of major philanthropic organizations, which were particularly active in the 1930s and 40s. This distinctly political dimension of marketing--as a mechanism for inclusion deeply embedded in the American social model is absent from the book. It was later reactivated in the 1960s by civil rights movements and feminist and gay activists (Cohen, 2003; Johnson, 2019)<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, marketing-driven rationalization may find itself confronted with concurrent forms of rationalization. This is particularly evident in companies, where marketing rationality runs up against other rationalities--such as engineering and financial considerations--that seek to guide its direction and lay claim to its human resources and budgets. On this issue, Neil Fligstein's work (1990) is particularly instructive. He shows how, in big American industrial companies, successive

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<sup>1</sup>Hence the fate of marketing rationality depends for a large part on its internalization by consumers. As it relates to good and services, marketing rationality has become a kind of second nature, since "nearly everyone does the work of marketers .... Marketing thus becomes contemporary society's end and means ... Similarly, contemporary societies have confined their survival to the marketing system, despite the fact that it was never subjected to critical examination or a major political choice; nor was it ever advanced by an organized group of actors" (418-419).

<sup>2</sup>In this work, Joseph Turow, for his part, considers how market professionals broke with this inclusive political project to develop techniques, contributing, to the contrary, to transforming the market into an institution that fragments and discriminates (see, for example, Turrow, 1997).

"conceptions of control" have appeared over the twentieth century. The emphasis on marketing (including product differentiation, branding, advertising, distribution) was a way of grappling with the decline of Fordism, which was premised on the pursuit of greater productivity. CEOs began to be increasingly recruited from the ranks of sales and marketing professionals, rather than engineers. The conception of control that gives marketing an outsize role became dominant in the 1940s. Beginning in the 1970s, it was challenged, then sidelined by finance specialists, who compelled companies to adopt a model emphasizing profitability and the maximization of share value.

That Le Texier's perspective leads him to prioritize a specific chronology is ultimately quite logical. But it is a shame that his excessively one-sided and linear approach to marketing rationality, reduced to its formal elements, leads him to overlook the multiple rationalization dynamics at play--as well as their discontinuities and fluctuations.

## **Marketing: a research topic for the social sciences**

The book's core problem is that the author's critical perspective boils down to "going it alone" vis-à-vis the historical and sociological literature on marketing. Le Texier claims that "the social sciences have abandoned this topic" (p. 160). In fact, they have embraced it for years. He presents historical work on the topic as descriptive and precise, but too specialized and "unconcerned with distinguishing marketing's different facets" (p. 636). As for so-called "critical" approaches, which denounce the manipulations of marketing and advertising and ever-expanding commercialization, they lead Le Texier to defend marketing, which he believes they unjustly caricature. But he saves his harshest criticism for the comprehensive approach of economic sociology, which "do nothing more than observe the work of marketing and repeat what specialists, for over a century, have said" (p. 640).

These criticisms are partially baseless. Le Texier has little to say about Franck Cochoy's synthetic study (1999), even though he borrows considerably from its goals and approach. Furthermore, while sociology did indeed abandon marketing (except for a very critical form of sociology that denounces the manipulations of marketing and advertising), it has, over the past four decades, been rediscovered by researchers adopting the framework of a revitalized sociology of markets--which Le Texier astonishingly reduces to the work of Michel Callon (Callon, 2017; for a broader survey

of this literature, see Mellet, 2023). The goal of these sociologists, who belong to different traditions and follow different approaches, has been to develop a sociology of markets (François, 2008; Steiner, 2010; Le Velly, 2012), examine commercial labor (Cochoy & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000), penetrate the inner world of marketing (Zwick & Cayla, 2011), reconnect marketing with markets (Araujo, Finch, Kjellberg, 2010), and incorporate marketing and its tools into the study of markets as spaces of moral and political struggle (Steiner & Trespeuch, 2013; Geiger et al., 2014; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016; Ansaloni, Trompette & Zalio, 2017).

Far from "repeating" marketing's own discourse, this new sociological research seeks to identify, qualify, and historicize the efforts undertaken by supply-side professionals to define and organize markets on their terms--without limiting their work to what Le Texier calls marketing rationality, but by also considering mechanisms, organizations, practices, and strategies. These frameworks are often incomplete and defective, and they clash with other frameworks embraced by public bodies and law, consumers and their representatives, and organizations and institutions that, in one way or another, view the market as a political instrument (Nouguez, Pilmis, 2022). Marketing professionals do not by themselves constitute the market. Hence the interest of studying them in the context of their companies and in the commercial and non-commercial spaces they aspire to organize and govern.

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