

When is Marketing Ethical?

Jeffrey Elkner

University of the People

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Dr. Soha Ragab

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The modern use of the term "marketing" as the process of moving goods from producer to consumer with an emphasis on sales and advertising first appeared in dictionaries in 1897 (Wikipedia contributors, 2020, May 24). This is contemporaneous with the full emergence of industrial capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century, and with the bourgeoisie completing their project of becoming the dominant social class. In our present epoch of global neo-liberal capitalism, there is no corner of the world that is not under the dominance of the present global economic system, a system which French economist Thomas Piketty calls "neo-prorietarian". This system has produced ever larger inequality in wealth and income, and Piketty says that neo-prorietarianism's ideological justification of this growing inequality is rooted in an extreme form of meritocratic ideology that glorifies the winners in the economic system while stigmatizing the losers for their supposed lack of merit, virtue, and diligence (2019, 1748/2744). In the final section of his more than one thousand page "Capital and Ideology", Piketty presents extensive data describing the shift over the last four decades in the political parties of the left from being parties of the working class to being parties of the educated elite. He shows that this shift has occurred in every country for which data is available, including France, England, the United States, Poland, and India. At the same time as these formerly working class parties have become increasingly dominated by what he calls the "Brahmin left", voter participation rates among marginalized people have shown a steady decline. We thus face a situation in which the global system is currently ruled by two contending elitist political formations, the Brahmin left and the merchant right, with the bottom eighty percent of the citizens of these countries ending up with a smaller and smaller share of the nation's wealth (2019).

At the root of our present global ideology is the worship of private property rights as unquestionable and the belief in the infallibility of the market. While it still reigns supreme, it is a worldview that lost all intellectual credibility with the financial crash of 2008, and which is increasingly undergoing a crisis of legitimacy. It will now be put further to the test with the post pandemic economic troubles that lie ahead of us. It has already proved itself incapable of dealing with the two most pressing problems of our time, climate change and growing wealth and income inequality, and does not provide any clear path out of the current crisis.

So for me, the question is not when marketing "crosses the line" into unethical behavior, but rather when, if ever, it is possible for it to remain within the bounds of ethical behavior. I believe we need a radically new ideological consensus that values people and the planet above profits and creates new "rules of the game" that embody and reinforce these values. I do not know what form such new rules should take, but I do know that we should be devoting a large part of our collective energies trying to create them. I suspect that more cooperative forms of "ownership" and the institution of increasing forms of democracy at work will be important parts of the solution.

The first step toward creating a more just and sustainable world will be to overcome the defeatism embodied in Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative" (Wikipedia contributors, 2020, May 6). We need to break out of what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism", which he characterizes as an intellectual straight-jacket in which "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" (2009). We might start with the understanding that market fetishism is a very recent phenomenon in human history. It has a beginning in the not so distant past and will have an end, hopefully in the not too distant future. It might be helpful to know, for

example, that in both Feudal China and Japan, merchants were on the bottom rung of the social hierarchy, not the top (Szczepanski, 2019, & Kara, Gok, & Zhu, 2011). We might next expose directly how hopelessly flawed the current economic system is in dealing with crises like the current pandemic. The YouTube video, "Capitalism And The American Pandemic Response", does a great job of doing that (Second Thought, 2020). The system is bankrupt, and it is not invincible. It is time for us together to build something new.

I keep returning to the definition of marketing presented in chapter one of our text, "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (The University of Minnesota, 2010). Within this broad definition is a germ of hope that can salvage value in the activity called marketing and make it ethical. It can do this when it becomes the activity, institutions and processes that create, communicate, and deliver value for partners and society at large. We at NOVA Web Development deeply hope we can find a way to make a just and decent living for our members while engaging in just this kind of activity.

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