

The governmentality of marketing discourse

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Abstract

This paper provides a reading of mainstream academic marketing discourse based upon Foucault's concept of governmentality. Three periods of marketing thought are identified, described and analyzed—'early marketing thought' (c. 1900–1960), 'marketing management' (c. 1950–1985) and 'service management' (c. 1975–present). For these three periods, respectively, our focus is on analyzing what marketing seeks to govern, how marketing governs, and who we become when governed by marketing. It is argued that customer orientation has become the dominant governmental discursive practice in marketing—it has embedded marketing discourse more and more deeply over time. By exposing the governmental rationality of marketing, this paper provides a basis for resisting and deconstructing marketing discourse.

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1. Introduction

Marketing has been an important force in legitimizing, producing and reproducing not only the consumerism but also the managerialism that characterizes contemporary society and its organizations (du Gay, 1996). One way to develop an informed understanding of the impact of marketing is to reflect upon and critically evaluate its history, both as a practice and as a school of thought (Hollander, Rassuli, Jones, & Farlow Dix, 2005), by taking a theoretical point of departure outside the marketing discipline itself. In engaging

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with such a reflexive project the present paper reports a reading of mainstream academic marketing discourse from its initial formulations at the beginning of the 20th century, via its maturity in the marketing management era, to its present formulation in the service management literature.

Our reading of marketing discourse is not conventional and in particular introduces two distinctive features that constitute the originality of the paper. First, we conceptualize marketing as a management discipline. This means that we do not read marketing primarily as a discipline focusing upon exchange relationships (Hunt, 1991) or as a discipline preoccupied with finding and satisfying consumer needs (Kotler, 2003). Rather, we place an emphasis on which types of government and management of organizations and their members that the marketing discipline envisions. Secondly, our reading of marketing discourse is informed by Foucault's concept of governmentality (Foucault, 2000a, b, see also Dean, 1995, 1999; Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1996, 1999). As a consequence, our paper is less concerned with prior definitions of power and government than with the unfolding context-specific discursive practices and technologies of control that constitute the actors and interests of a particular governmental regime.

Even though the work of Foucault has been utilized to analyze managerial discourse within several streams of management studies (see Alvesson & Willmott, 1996, 2003 for overviews), including accounting (Edenius & Hasselbladh, 2002; Miller & O'Leary, 1987), human resource management (Townley, 1993), and general management (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Knights & McCabe, 1999), it has not been frequently used in marketing (Burton, 2001). A few studies, however, have pioneered the analysis of marketing from a Foucauldian perspective (Brownlie, Saren, Wensley, & Whittington, 1999; Cochoy, 1998; Hackley, 2003; Hodgson, 2002; Knights & Sturdy, 1997; Morgan, 2003; Skålén & Fougère, in press), among which one draws specifically on the notion of governmentality (Hodgson, 2002). However, in previous research, the governmentality of marketing as a prescriptive management discourse has not been focused on.

The analysis of the marketing discipline in the present paper draws in particular on an analytical scheme outlined by Dean (1995, 1999), which makes us ask three questions in the analysis: what does marketing seek to govern, how does marketing govern and who do we become when we are governed by marketing? It is important to note, however, that our analysis does not intend to determine whether or not the marketing discipline actually does fixate a particular subjectivity. Rather, it aims to pinpoint the subjectivity that marketing discourse envisions. Dean (1999, p. 32, *emphasis in original*) is very clear on this:

The forms of identity promoted and presupposed by various practices and programmes should not be confused with a *real* subject, subjectivity or subject position ... Regimes of government do not *determine* forms of subjectivity. They elicit, promote, facilitate, foster and attribute various capacities, qualities and statuses to particular agents.

The paper opens with a section introducing our Foucauldian framework with a special focus on the concepts of governmentality and government. In Section 2, we discuss methodology and outline our periodization of the marketing discipline. This is followed by a description and an analysis of marketing discourse in Section 3. In Section 4, we discuss the implications of the analysis. In Section 5, we put forward our conclusions as well as avenues for further research.

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