Editorial for

# De-romanticising the market: Advances in Consumer Culture Theory

James Fitchett, University of Leicester School of Business, Leicester, UK

James Cronin, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, UK[1]

[1] Corresponding author: James Cronin, j.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk

(IMPORTANT: Please do not cite this version. This is a pre-proofed draft of the editorial accepted for forthcoming publication in *Journal of Marketing Management* (2022). No corrections or proofing edits have been made to this draft. Please refer to the official and final copy-edited version @ https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2045126 for referencing)

## Introduction

This special issue continues in the spirit of ongoing debates on the future prospects, challenges, and limitations of the compelling academic project named consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007, 2015, 2019; Arnould et al, 2019; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Askegaard and Scott, 2013; Belk and Sobh, 2019; Bode and Østergaard, 2013; Rokka, 2021; Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler, 2013). The original idea for the issue emerged from a "critical curiosity" (Shankar and Zurn, 2020) to imagine what a modest denaturalisation and de-romanticisation of the market-centrism of CCT might look like. The problem for many of us working in the general area of CCT is that, for obvious reasons, it can often feel like we know quite a lot about where our research discussions will probably and inevitably conclude, even before we have begun to contemplate entering the proverbial field. We start out with our focus trained squarely on consumption and, by the end, it will usually have led to a comment on consumption. That tight focus might, of course, bequeath readers with different types, forms, or dimensions of consumption, and insights into the ambits and contexts of consumption, or perhaps, on occasion, even an evaluation of consumption's merits and demerits. But usually consumption nevertheless. It is in the title after all. Of course, many might believe that there is nothing especially problematic about this kind of inevitability. Consumption remains very much part of the spirit of the age we live in, whatever one might think about it. And yet a nagging problem persists. No matter how sophisticated, nuanced, proliferated and subtle our accounts of consumption become, a sense of unease remains regarding the inevitable need for boundaries, limitations, and the foreclosed opportunities they necessitate (Fitchett et al, 2014; Graeber, 2011). As the papers and commentaries in this special issue illustrate, some of the most interesting things about consumption and markets are found at the edges of where the material world, shared social conditions, and global capital converge, and where their cultural, ideological, ecological, and political obduction fractures and splits.

Debates have amassed across various articles and book chapters about the importance of recontextualising the lived experience of consumers and consumption events within the historic, economic, material, and precognitive ambits of society or humanity more broadly (Akaka, Vargo, and Schau, 2015; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Bajde, 2013; Botez, Hietanen, and Tikkanen, 2020; Coffin, 2021; Hill, Canniford and Mol, 2014; Hoang, Cronin and Skandalis, 2021; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Siebert and Giesler, 2012). Sessions centring on critical themes and novel epistemological perspectives that travel beyond the discursive world familiar in marketing and consumer research are also a regular feature of CCT Conferences

and the Interpretive Consumer Research (ICR) workshops. The growing body of work that digs deeper into reality and emphasises how consumer practices (and even the designation of "consumer" itself) are encapsulated by and integrated into much wider network configurations and micro–, meso–, macro–, para–, and cosmo–social aspects of life that are sometimes "unrepresentable" through institutionalised concepts and discursive framing, helps to reveal a maturing outlook of the CCT community. Today, CCT researchers regularly demonstrate a commitment to reflexively introspecting upon, problematising, and re-evaluating their own institutional assumptions and legacy. The heteroglossic agenda of the CCT "brand" appears to formidably promote a culture that is welcoming to ongoing shifts and chronic revisions to its central aims, traditions, and assumptions (Thompson et al. 2013).

But this openness and willingness to review, revise and refresh may not itself be sufficient to ensure the continued success of the CCT tradition, and in fact it may be a further indication of the crisis that studies of consumption, in general, face in shoring up their relevancy (Graeber, 2011) and ability to affect thought in a "critically performative" sense (Tadajewski, 2010). As we discuss in an interview with Søren Askegaard (included in this special issue), the twin challenges of climate change and inequality deeply implicate consumption and markets at almost every level. And for many watching from outside of the realm of business schools, whether in government, on social science grant awarding boards, steering groups, or "expert" taskforces, it would appear that we cannot simply consume our way out of these kinds of emergencies.

Of course, that does not mean that the CCT community has little to offer by way of insights, conceptual blueprints, and theoretical innovations that might assist in understanding society's stubborn challenges. As convincingly discussed by Belk and Sobh (2019), few are better positioned in the broad field of consumer behaviour than CCT scholars to dare for more original, novel, and explanatory theorisation of the material world around us. But the fundamental question nonetheless remains as to whether a more viable future for people and planet would be more conceivable if we are able to change, evolve, adapt, and reimagine our forms of romantic, postmodern *consumption* into some other, yet-to-be-clearly-defined reflexive and, ultimately, "sustainable" alternative(s) (see Arnould, in this special issue). If we are committed to this kind of thought experimentation then spaces such as this, at the epicentre of discussions about marketing, management, business, consumption, buying and so on, are urgently needed.

While consumption and the subject position of the consumer are substantial contributions to society's grand challenges, they must – as Askegaard in this issue tells us – also form a substantial part of whatever solutions are theorised, even if that means dismantling, de- and re-territorializing, and reimagining what markets and marketing should and should not be used for. There is, though, a more incremental pragmatism to this radical gesture. In order to further shore up CCT's claims to knowledge as a respected interdisciplinary tradition, we must continue to move past the ontological market-centrism that dominates its writings and tethers it to the substratum of the business school. Notwithstanding the immense value of the hard-fought territory that CCT researchers claimed from "normal science" psychological consumer research in the so-called paradigm wars of old (Sherry, 2014), the next great battle is for territory beyond the business school. For the CCT project to be both "critical and engaged" (Bridgman, 2007, p.428), and for its insights to better find their way to the highest levels of constituency outside of the marketing academy, whether this is advisory groups related to public policy or interdisciplinary fora for societal and existential problems, efforts must continue to be made to break past the truncated parameters imposed by a market-ontology on our intellectual pursuits.

Rokka (2021, p.114) recently commented that, "CCT's future looks promising in its commitment and ability to foster critical, contextually sensitive, and reflexive cultural insights into marketing – an important foundation for marketing strategy and practices". This we absolutely agree with but would like to add that in today's "*surreal*" or post-normal world of perpetual crises in which horror stacks upon horror (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini, 2020), CCT's future does not stop with marketing. CCT as a maturing project has reached a point in its development that its researchers can now afford, and should feel confident, to revisit the structural and experiential realities of our material and social worlds with a revisionist eagerness which dispels the cognitive limits that sustain reining political-ideological orthodoxies and their performative intent.

**The Consumer: Our hero in history**

As others have emphasised, CCT is in no way a unified theory (Arnould et al, 2019; Thompson et al., 2013). It is, instead, a pluralising and evolving assembly of perspectives on consumers and consumption that impact and interpenetrate with cultural life. The CCT project's specialist emphasis on the consumer and consumption is neither the product of

reductivism nor insincerity but an act of calculated necessity. Its ideological tethering to "the market" (in its broadest terms), and the logic and parlance of consumption are necessary and intuitive concessions that go back to, and even predate, the paradigm wars. Without there being at least some pronounced market- and consumption- related centrism in our writings and explanations, academic outputs risk appearing wildly out of scope for the major marketing outlets, where our efforts are typically directed. The CCT community remains largely comprised of academics from marketing departments which are held to their own standards of identity, performance, and legitimacy in terms of marketing journals, marketing conferences and so on. The words "markets", "marketing", and "consumer" provide very visible and legitimate boundaries to what we say, do, and identify with. They nevertheless reflect and sustain a cognitive limit constituted by today's dominant political-ideological apparatus: the experience of conceiving only of the world within the processes of a capitalist market economy. That cognitive limit, what the late Mark Fisher (2009) aptly termed "capitalist realism", naturalises both the tacit acceptance and conviction that there is no conceivable reality outside of what can be explained away as consumption, and the ruling illusion that it is simply fair, correct, and appropriate that everything in society be thought of in terms of market language and logic.

But to universally label and conceptualise social actors – whether medical patients, athletes, commuters, musicians, internet trolls, motorists, students, religious zealots, the homeless, the illiterate, "incels", or anyone else – as consumers and to acritically read all possible social acts as forms of consumption reflects the depredations of a neoliberal capitalist logic and reinforces the ethos of consumption's omnilegitimacy rather than captures the full and variegated complexity of how things might really be (Saren, 2015). Consumption, as anthropologists such as Graeber (2011) remind us, is simply a metaphor or a perspective not a non-ideological fact of life. When consumption becomes everything, *distanciation* – or our capacity to take a step back from (and thoughtfully re-appraise) "reality" – breaks down and our scope for novel and impactful theorisation shrinks. If nowhere exists beyond the consumption truths of capitalist realism, then distance is unobtainable, making alternative explanations inconceivable.

The cognitive limit of extracting out consumption above all else effaces not only the consumption metaphor's own historicity and contingency but also its very function as an ontological, if not ideological, lens. We might even contemplate that effacement is what works to define studies of consumption generally. The hegemonic hold that capitalist realism has over

our capacity to label, explain, and problematise social and material worlds is reflected in our institutionalised thinking that all forms of socio-material organisation are impossible to envisage without identifying and foregrounding consumers, markets, and consumption events. Devising scholarly and engaging alternatives is, tragically, as Tadajewski (2022, p.3) suggests, "displaced by the sedimentation of fatalism within *some* of the social environments in which we work, study and make our way; often being compounded by dehumanisation that forms the fairly visible organisational agenda at some business schools".

Nevertheless, as the work published by many in the field of critical marketing studies shows, finding ways of critiquing and breaking past our cognitive limits can produce inspired analyses that will not result in all out anarchy in the pages of marketing journals or the halls of business schools (Andéhn, Hietanen, and Lucarelli, 2020; Carrington, Zwick, and Neville, 2016; Shankar, 2009; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Contending with or defatalising (and sometimes dispensing with) the language and parlance of the marketplace is not antithetical to producing scholarly accounts of marketing, commodity exchange, and their political surrounds (Hill and McDonagh, 2020). More generally, some of the most insightful and useful commentaries on issues that pertain to the thresholds and contents of late capitalist commodity systems are those that unmask and unfasten themselves from the subtle but pervasive influence of conventions that structure the conduct of consumption-related research, including those that point out the limitations and narrowness implicit to the consumption metaphor (Graeber 2011), as well as those that expose the seduction of consumption as a totalising and insatiable discourse into which all of social, political and economic life appears subsumed (Baudrillard [1968] 1996). It is in this spirit that this special issue sets out to provide a space to show how CCT can query, challenge, and reimagine alternatives to the totalising systems and cognitive limits that function as the buttresses for its theoretical and analytical agendas. Our intention, in many ways, is to encourage a renewed "*sceptical reflexivity*" (Brownlie and Hewer, 2007, p.45, emphasis in original) within our development and refinement of theory and its uses. But before we progress further, it is important to clarify first what is meant by the "de-romanticisation" term floated on the headers of the special issue.

**Which part of consumption seduces you the most?**

The title of the special issue "De-romanticising the Market" in some ways functions as the obverse of the title of Brown, Doherty, and Clarke's (1998) visionary book *Romancing the*

*Market*. The essays within Brown and colleagues' collection brilliantly emphasised the essential romanticism of consumption, and underscore the post-Cold War Anglo-American-European market societies as pluralistic liberal spaces catalysed by the libidinous impulses of unbound individuals exercising their inalienable right to enrich their personal lives and pursue their self-interests. Romanticism centres on tenets of originality, passion, aestheticism, agency, creativity, inspiration and, especially, imagination – attributes which Brown et al. painted a vivid picture of within markets, throughout marketing, and amongst the subjects of consumer culture. Though we do not disagree that subject-object relations during the postmodern, post-politics, end-of-history pastiche-and-irony-stuffed bonanza of the 1990s evinced an *espièglerie* that must have appeared both imaginative and blissful, if not amorous, to those of us writing within the marketing academy at that time, the lineaments of relationships that were perhaps already growing more cynical than romantic have since been revealed and debated. Where Brown (1998, p.788) had emphasised, "Falling head over heels in love with something, be it a computer game or bar of chocolate, is the norm rather than the exception", critical commentators today consider how a significant population of subjects under the narcissistic, competitive framework of late-capitalism rarely demonstrate such fierce passion for their consumerism, and how their attachments come from a place that we could scarcely call "love" (Ahlberg et al, 2021; Hoang et al, 2021; Lambert, 2019; Wickstrom et al, 2021). Rather, for subjects experiencing precarity, marginalisation, and inequity within a capitalist architecture of aggressive self-interest and image-obsessiveness – such as those involved in looting shops during the English urban riots of 2011 – there is what ultra-realist criminologists Simon Winlow and Steve Hall describe as:

> "a lazy and disinterested attachment, functioning simply as a means of addressing an issue that cannot be accounted for, because it cannot be named as what it is: permanent socioeconomic marginalization in a system whose core logic and current trajectory will never again be able to provide full and guaranteed socioeconomic participation for the growing number of those who consistently lose out in the unrelenting struggle of competitive individuals." (Winlow and Hall, 2012, p.484)

The vortices of fetishistic playthings, social media, and lifestyle accoutrements that swirl around subjects and ensnare their desires do not represent romantic fulfilment or self-enrichment, but are tragically grasped at as a substitute symbolic order to anaesthetise the inarticulate, existential, and repressed anxieties that sit deep within the hollow, obscure centre of human subjectivity (Žižek, 1997). Many young subjects of capitalism rarely appear to be *falling in love* with their consumer symbolism, but instead, to quote Fisher in reference to the

students he taught at a Further Education (FE) college, are simply "falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana" (Fisher, 2009, p.23).

Admittedly, what we classify and label as consumption has for so very long appeared to be a welcome resolve to the pervasive human feeling that something is missing from life, but it has increasingly become clear that it basically functions to redirect desires away from the eudaemonial arenas of politics, art, nature, and human relations, to a myriad of substitute materialist and experientialist narcoses (Gabriel, 2015). De-romanticising the market encourages recognition that "the market" is a construct that is dreamt up to relentlessly arouse, but never satiate, desires. It's first duty is to propagate and reproduce its own function and logic through the sensuous reward circuitry of a base libidinal economy. The consequence of this is not a universal arena of perfectly satisfied, loved up consumers who can express themselves in market-given utopias but is, for a large portion of our population, one of perpetual contest, addiction, and cynical pragmatism to stave off feelings of "*lack"* but is incapable of imparting any durable satisfactions. Rather than preserving the ideological assumption that there is a genuine and fulfilling love between the subjects of consumer culture and the market, we might equally search for and detect an "other-abasing self-love" that is based on "more than a desire to have – it is a desire to have at the expense of others" (Cluley and Dunne, 2012, p. 253). Consumer culture has engendered deep cynicism, individualism, competition, envy, and inertia that are now elementary features of contemporary cultural life. As a useful empirical account, Lambert's (2019) analysis of young women's stories of trying and sometimes failing to fulfil neoliberal ideals built on agency, entrepreneurialism, and creativity signal the lethargy, anxiety, and self-doubt that comes with centring one's life around the marketplace. Amongst the women she speaks with, Lambert detects a sense of shame regarding their own consumerist values and a knowing awareness of the superficiality of their commodity-oriented identity investments, though they do them anyway.

That kind of cynical disavowal of one's knowing participation in a problematic system is a focal theme for a de-romanticised view of the market. The catastrophe of consumption is everywhere should one dare to look, and in the shadows cast by the looming tragedies we face tomorrow, romanticism appears deeply anachronistic. Consumption helps to produce the conditions that lead to wide-scale environmental harms, yet consumer subjects, through the mantra of being "green" or "ethical", can continue their projects unperturbed (Brisman and South, 2014). Consumption, and its underpinning market-liberal ideologies, contributed to and

interpenetrated with the precarities of the Great Recession of 2007-2012, the reactive nationalistic and isolationist tendencies of 2016, and, not least, the human-caused climate crisis, with warning signs signalling that ocean temperatures are relentlessly increasing. The acceleration of the COVID-19 pandemic has also been debated as deeply embedded in the globalised neoliberal capitalist system with its borderless global value chains and intercontinental production and consumption systems (Svetličič, 2021). Even mundane and mostly invisibilised – or "passengerial" – aspects of consumption, such as the ubiquity of plastics in daily life, continue in their furtive omnipresence to engender mounting environmental harms (Cronin, Hadley, and Skandalis, 2022). Amongst all of the associated malaise, whether economic, political, health, or ecological/climate crises, there is an opportunity for us, as de-romanticists, to explore the immense effort, resources, and deployment of the technologies of distraction which conspire to provide that most desirable of all alibis – the ability not to see what is directly in front of us, one of Žižek's (2006) famous "unknown knowns". How this can so convincingly be achieved should be no great mystery to those who study the practices of marketing management. The critical and progressive capitalist is surely the most *avant-garde* of all lifestyles available to the consumer today and the message of *"Don't look up"* is sold and consumed as entertainment while literally seducing the audience to obey that message and all of its terrifying consequences (McKay, 2021). This is perhaps why guilt, anxiety and a general sense of foreboding are such relevant strategies of persuasion in the market now.

For the average middle-class consumer, if such a subject could be reasonably assumed to exist or be aspired for, it is becoming increasingly more difficult not to be permanently confronted with apocalyptic media, messages, and product promotions that implicate them personally while simultaneously and interpassively performing their guilt for them (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015). Of course, the problem is also more complex and difficult to comprehend than this, because consumer capitalism has been successful due to the fact that any visions of viable alternatives have long since faded and are now almost completely absent from popular discourse (Fisher, 2009). Indeed, it might be said that critical discourse today can be summed up by the general belief that consumerism is probably the worst form of culture except for all those others that have been tried from time to time. While scepticism, anxiety and a sense of guilt may be a feature of "Western" consumer subjectivity today, there is limited evidence to suggest that this is really anything more than the fashion of the world's privileged seeking out the latest form of cultural distinction.

**To De-Romanticise**

A cold, somewhat brutal de-romanticised survey of the landscape of consumer culture(s) today is not difficult to conduct. However, by encouraging a de-romanticisation of the market, we do not advocate the brutal *cancelling* of all assumptions that the market can function as a space for expression and play, rather we call for maturing appreciation that such functioning is never automatic and is often engineered, and is never universal but is highly conditional. Just like what can outwardly look like a loving relationship between two human beings might in fact be one of inertia, comfort, complacency, convenience, circumstance, or even abuse; the ostensibly romantic relationships that subjects have with consumer symbolism may not always be what they seem. De-romanticising calls for attention to movements that aid disruption to the subtle interplay of comfortable actions and reactions, and to the predictability of those arguments and counter arguments that endlessly recirculate to create a simulacrum of progress, critique, and revision. This is a call to attempt to break the often-mesmerising seduction of consumption as well as its passionate critique, for while they self-evidently appear to be in opposition to one another they are also mutually complicit. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard shares with us a cautionary note on seduction and its revelation when the beauty and violence of that relationship is brought to bear:

> And so the cruel story of the woman to whom a man has written a passionate letter and who asks in her turn: 'What part of me seduced you the most?' To which he replies, 'Your eyes,' and receives by return mail, wrapped in a package, the eye which seduced him. (Baudrillard [1983] 2008, p.151-152)

Here the dance of romantic seduction is broken and exposed. The fantasies of amorous intent transform into a brutal horror; the seducer is laid bare as a "fatal object", which Baudrillard warns, "drags the subject down to annihilation" (p.152). De-romanticists study within the realities of annihilation that subjects face in contemporary life, and uphold a critical curiosity towards the inescapable (fated) deadlocks, challenges, and horrors that are as constant as the sun rising every day. The de-romanticist's ethos is characterised by an ideological break with market-centrism and capitalist realism, and a suspicion towards returning to institutionalised concepts when novel problems present themselves. To de-romanticise means to work with, advance, import and export concepts and theories that can foster deeper understanding of the "wicked problems"[1] that society encounters, but also to be brave enough to challenge those

[1] Though various definitions and interpretations exist, Churchman (1967, B-141) defines wicked problems as "that class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there

ideas that might offer small comforts but risk ensconcing us in the ambient ideological-political assumptions of the day.

**Key Themes**

Importantly, unlike other accounts of CCT (Askegaard and Scott 2013; Belk, 2017; Joy and Li, 2012; Price, 2017; Rokka, 2021), this special issue says little about the history and roots of the CCT project itself, which we would like to think suggests a sense of disciplinary maturity if nothing else. Much has already been written about the particularisms of the pathways to acceptance for non-positivist consumer research. This special issue was never intended to be a venue to re-invoke how oft-cited historic events, like the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey (Belk, 1991) or the paradigm wars (Sherry, 2014), functioned as crucial turning points for CCT. However integral that history is to the crystallisation of CCT scholarship, and the vitality, legitimacy, and intellectual adventurousness it has emboldened the project with, our hope when working through this special issue was to venture off the well-trodden highways and byways and traipse curiously and vulnerably into the darker, less charted terrain that beckons from the periphery. The tragedies that await society in the near future extend beyond the parameters of business school interests and thus require a resetting of our ontological compasses, a humility to subject our theoretical toolkits to scrutiny, and the courage to seek out answers in wilder *"inter-species"* habitats further afield than the territories that are most familiar and comfortable to us.

The special issue consists of 4 papers, 3 commentaries, and an interview with Søren Askegaard. In the first paper, *Marketplace cultures for social change? New Social Movements and Consumer Culture Theory*, Georgios Patsiaouras explores two urban social movements, the anti-austerity movement in Greece and the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, to show how marketplace exchanges can be integrated with and presented as a collective political force to: challenge economic determinism, protest regressive infringements on civic liberty, and foster localised, informal *more-than-market* networks. Patsiaouras identifies the need to pay closer attention to the policies, macro-economic events, and institutional forces that new social movements challenge and seek to transform, as well as these groups' own potential for political durability. Patsiaouras discusses the macro-structures that shape

---

are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing".

consumption during periods of political unrest and the vividly spatial strategies and aesthetics that new social movements engage in to stage their interventions. Through his analyses, Patsiaouras allows us to imagine how CCT might be developed to give a better understanding of political and geographic actions such as the strategic occupation of public and commercial spaces, and how these actions function as important indicators for gauging perceptions about the current state of consumer culture and its contextualising conditions. The paper makes a compelling case for CCT scholars to depart from anti-consumption and anti-branding micro-practices within small-scale cultural milieu and consider instead more systemic forms of resistance and how multi-actor anti-conformist market logics can emerge through mass, enduring collective protest. While the anti-materialist sentiments expressed by new social movements within urban spaces are significant, they can also have a transnational economic and cultural impact. The strategic occupation of space and the communicative strategies and aesthetics used by new social movements can recreate public and commercial sites as arenas of participation involving peaceful, collaborative, visual and interactive political expression. The paper denaturalises and departs from an exclusive focus on consumption alone to reveal the important dialectic interactions between constructs such as occupation and commerce. Understanding those interactions necessitates thinking not just of the consumer subject but of other intersecting subjectivities and stakeholders including citizens, metropolitans, business owners, tourists, government decision-makers, and state authorities (police enforcement).

In the next paper, the demand to de-romanticise market fetishism in CCT is interpreted as saying as much about those making such demands as it does about the field of enquiry where the romanticism of consumer culture is supposedly evidenced. In *De-Romanticising Critical Marketing Theory: Capitalist Corruption as the Left's Žižekean Fantasy*, Jack Coffin and Carys Egan-Wyer encourage us to turn our gaze back on ourselves to question the motives, desires, and fantasies that we, as de-romanticists, are prone to be seduced by when we engage in a general critique of consumption. The origins of CCT as a multidisciplinary project – and one that should be willing to question and even reject some of the apparently natural assumptions of the marketing department and the business school – continues to produce schisms within the field. Almost 40 years ago, Morris Holbrook warned consumer researchers of the dangers of complicity, the appeasement to capitalism, and the desirability of seeking progressive ways forward: 'Some might argue that there is nothing wrong with being reasonably flexible and bending our research interests a little to suit the needs of business. But, very quickly, "bent" becomes "biased", "biased" becomes "distorted", and "distorted"

becomes “warped”’ (Holbrook, 1985, p. 153). For Coffin and Egan-Wyer, that desire to resist bias and distortion constitutes one of our primary ideological fantasies through which the ‘critical consumer researcher’ – the de-romanticist – is constituted. They write that while capitalism is problematic, so too are aspects of the human condition. While it is certainly true that CCT has fetishised the consumer, it has also fetishised its critique, providing what Coffin and Egan-Wyer describe as ‘a means through which critical scholars can accept the truth but also lie to themselves about the scale and scope of the problem’ (2022, p. 63). Whether or not one agrees with Coffin and Egan-Wyer that psychoanalysis provides a less romantic rendition of the human condition and therefore a means to potentially reinvigorate and reimagine new forms of critique, it would appear that our efforts to avoid confronting the revenge of the ‘Real’ while endlessly desiring to do so are worth reflecting on.

Regardless of the elaborate kinds of retooling, re-evaluating, or reimagining of capitalism that de-romanticists within CCT and wider critical marketing scholarship are capable of engaging in, the hard truth that post-capitalist societies will continue to face problems remains largely unspoken. When it comes to issues such as sustainability, critical scholars have the tendency to ignore the flawed nature of the human condition and concentrate instead on systemic change and socioeconomic experimentation as a panacea. The critique of capitalism and market logic, while presenting a useful and alluring frame for expanding the frontiers of CCT and revealing/exorcising its underpinning ideologies, is not by itself free from ideology. The fantasies which underpin and animate the critique of capitalism within a field such as CCT are, for Coffin and Egan-Wyer, entirely ideological and risk obfuscating the material challenges of a post-market, post-capitalist future.

The problem that Coffin and Egan-Wyer identify is that we – critics, liberals, progressives, and fundamentalists alike – can all too often be found trapped in the same cultural and economic gravity well. Here, critique and advocacy can descend into circular and repetitive renditions which eventually fizzle out into a banal resignation regarding the inevitable fate of capitalism. Perhaps there is even some sense of reassurance in this. While even imagining viable alternatives to consumption and markets would seem to be becoming more difficult, we need to ask whether this is because such visions are moving beyond our reach or whether we are choosing not to look far enough. This tendency towards self-limitation is not only a predicament for CCT but for all marketing theory which is prone to naturalisation and attention to the apparently self-evident. The next paper in this issue, Eric Arnould’s *Ontology and Circulation: Towards an Eco-economy of Persons*, can be read as an attempt to remind CCT

researchers that such narrow-minded resignations are not necessary or inevitable but a choice we choose to make.

Arnould is a visionary CCT writer because he continues to ask us to remember to put consumption, consumer culture, and capitalism in their appropriate cultural context, and from there we might be able to imagine alternative cultural fantasies. His contribution to the special issue transgresses neat cultural boundaries by inviting us to indulge in alternative ontological possibilities, including those that recognise the wider ecosystem and the species within as evolutionary units and as biological communicative agents between whom circulate a huge amount of resources. Arnould considers the possibility of moving beyond humanist thought and the human exceptionalism that have typically occupied a privileged position in CCT and other marketing theory traditions, to consider more closely the interdependent and interlinked relations that humans find themselves in with nature. By crystallising a neo-animist proposal, not just for the CCT community but for wider marketing and macro-marketing theory and practice and beyond, the anthropocentric biases of value creation and exchange are critiqued and countered with the holistic potential for transitive resource circulation relationships, reciprocal exchange, and gifting.

Drawing upon insightful sources like Tsing's (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Arnould thoughtfully contextualises how a neo-animist consumption system, underpinned by post-humanist and eco-feminist thought, offers up an alternative to the dominant social exchange paradigm which much of the modern marketing episteme rests upon. While CCT has taken many paths and has embraced a number of fads and fashions over the last 20 years or so, the return to culture is always possible and Arnould is chief among the community of CCT thinkers that continue to press the argument that it is necessary that we should do so. The most important general contribution of anthropology to CCT is surely to demonstrate that these 'consumer cultures' we have configured for ourselves are just that: just one set of possible cultural configurations among many, many others. Those forces, drives and conditions that, in appearance, are more or less permanent actually work in an illusory sense to conceal their impermanence, ephemerality, and precariousness. Cultures are effectively infinitely variable, and that we are confined to this particular *consumer cultural universe* for now is not especially remarkable or significant when considered from the anthropologist's gaze. Indeed, one need not apply any particular academic form of critique to observe the seemingly mindless, illogical and unfathomable implications of consumer culture sometimes. The fact that our collective desire to consume may likely

contribute to the widespread devastation of our physical existence on Earth, at least if one embraces a more pessimistic interpretation, is perhaps the most obvious illustration. But even this apparent cultural death drive is not especially unique or remarkable, and there are numerous examples in the anthropological record that catalogue apparent instances of cultural self-annihilation.

To simply say that needs, desires, the consumer subject, commodities, exchange or whatever are 'relative' misses the point that they are nevertheless culturally coherent, and therefore any visions for the future of consumer culture(s) must also work within this coherence. A neo-animistic consumer subjectivity offers the potential for a more relational and pluralistic understanding of what we call 'nature' based on a radical re-reading of ecosystem relationships that recognise the mutual dependence of entities in the global biome. Arnould's move here can itself be read psychoanalytically as a reflection of some institutional desire to dethrone the sovereign, responsibilised consumer, whose romantic onanistic project of self-realisation and betterment provides the warrant for unsustainable extractive economies and their totalising marketing processes.

An illustration of how the kind of totalising processes which Arnould suggests can manifest in consumer culture(s) is offered in Alisa Minina, Stefania Masè, and Jamie Smith's paper *Commodifying love: value conflict in online dating*. Minina and colleagues argue that the consumerist logic of modern online dating practices transforms human relationships and ultimately hinders value creation in consumption experiences. The fact that practices associated with 'romance', love, sex, and intimate affairs all operate as forms of 'economy' in the general sense of the term is after all a mainstay of cultural anthropology and historical analysis. The paper documents the way in which conflicting desires for love, care, and meaningful relationships – which by their very nature imply some sense of obligation and commitment – sit uneasily with a market logic of free choice, self-determination, individual preference, and value-seeking. When viewed in the context of the now well-developed CCT canon, this paper reminds us that consumer culture(s) have the capacity to be endlessly and frustratingly mesmerising in their insatiable ability to occupy and colonise any and all aspects of lived experience for the purposes of accumulation. Online dating apps and services achieve the final transformation of consumers into desiring machines, attaining what can be described as a kind of endless, unfulfilling consumer organism marked by choice-making, anxiety, hope, fantasy, and self-doubt.

The next paper in the special issue, *Consumer culture theory and its contented discontent: an interview with Søren Askegaard*, includes a dialogue between us (James Cronin and James Fitchett) and Søren Askegaard, the President of the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium. The interview touches upon the status and challenges of CCT as a multidisciplinary tradition, and the road ahead for securing broadening readership and approval by actors outside the business school such as social science grant-awarding bodies. A number of themes emerge pertaining to the future potential of CCT. Askegaard speaks candidly about CCT's journey to move beyond the parameters of the micro-sociological, and the possibilities that can emerge through tackling the macro end of world issues. For Askegaard, given the expertise and interests of its scholarly community, there are opportunities for the CCT project to make important research contributions and policy impacts. The topics of geography and 'consumption logistics' also emerge, and the 'return of politics' is a key talking point in the conversation. The interview follows many interesting avenues and digressions, as well as some space for an emerging comedy at times, but the overall sentiment of the discussion is one of measured aspiration in that there is still much to do for CCT. One of the pressing challenges for Askegaard is to continue to develop CCT as both an inclusive and open space but also one that acknowledges and responds to its inevitable biases. While many in the Global North may appear to be ready to write the obituary for their excursion into a meritocratic and image-obsessed consumer culture, the majority of people on the planet eagerly await their opportunity to participate and give it a new vitality. It may well be the case that the 20th century 'Western' experiment of consumer capitalism will in future be read as a mere essay in the craft, and that the full potential, calamity and opportunity of a genuinely globalised consumer culture is only now emerging. Theorising and understanding that future requires multiple and heterogeneous perspectives.

The special issue concludes with a series of shorter invited commentaries. In their commentary entitled *Some reflections on interdisciplinary CCT research: field boundaries, social impact and the semantics of consumer vulnerability*, Kathy Hamilton and Holly Porteous reflect on some of the challenges of working across conventional disciplinary boundaries to show how misunderstandings and preconceptions that might otherwise inhibit the development of CCT can be overcome and accommodated. Hamilton and Porteous contend with the baggage of disciplinary language especially – such as the labelling of people as 'consumers' – when bridging CCT research with colleagues and topic areas outside of marketing departments. Their commentary also touches on a pragmatic but often overlooked concern: the process of applying

for and securing funding grants for interdisciplinary research, a structural challenge that Askegaard touches upon in his interview also. This commentary by Hamilton and Porteous does a great service to CCT by shining a light on the minutiae of interdisciplinary working and provides an exemplary case of how CCT researchers can reach out and engage with the broader academic community. It provides a mature reflection on how collaboration and cooperation beyond the marketing department can engender new paradigmatic choices for us as CCT scholars, but only when we are willing and able to take a closer and critical look at the conventions that are embedded in our ontological and conceptual assumptions and beliefs. There is still much work to be done to demonstrate the value and contribution of CCT research to other scholarly communities and initiatives.

In their commentary entitled *Invisible Hands or Hearts? A Feminist Critique of Consumerism and Market Centrism*, Andreas Chatzidakis and Pauline Maclaran emphasise the centrality of a mostly invisibilised 'care' in everyday economic life and explore how certain feminist traditions can offer CCT scholars critical tools to denaturalise their assumptions concerning the functioning of markets and consumption. They make several claims that resonate clearly with themes found in Arnould's and Minina et al.'s papers, as well as the commentary by Hamilton and Porteous. Like Arnould, Chatzidakis and Maclaran propose that innovations can be found in questioning some of the ontological and axiomatic assumptions of CCT, and especially through a willingness to engage more fully with discourses that have been, and to a large extent remain, de-centred and co-opted. As part of their discussion on alternative lenses to view economic life, they advocate for the necessity to better represent and appreciate that 'vulnerability', in contrast to how it is typically accounted for in consumer research, is not the sole preserve of specific groups or particular periods in the life course, but is an inescapable state and a shared feature of all social subjects' lives. There is much symbolic violence in the way that CCT, and marketing theory in general, is reproduced and, following some of the discussion in the interview with Askegaard, this is an area where more work needs to be done in terms of self-awareness and reflexivity on the part of CCT researchers.

The final commentary, *The 'Dividual' is Semiocapitalist Consumer Culture*, by Joel Hietanen, Oscar Ahlberg, and Andrei Botez, offers an experimental engagement with the shifting and emerging contours of subjectivity in an increasingly automated consumer culture and economy of divisible data flows. One of the enduring anxieties of CCT critique has been the problem of the self, the valorisation of the individual and the (excessive) agency afforded to the consumer subject. Hietanen et al.'s commentary offers a bleak diagnosis of the resolution

of this category error: one that is ambiguous and far from comforting. It is as if capital flows and their unholy alliance with technologies may soon be able to finally manage and externalise the unmanageable and unknowable consumer through radical transparency, fragmentation, and programming. For CCT, this opens up a set of broader questions concerning its future style and form. How do we 'do' CCT in an environment where the consumer subject is superficial, negated, dissolved and absent? As the authors comment, 'you cannot interview a dividual, a cyborg does not conduct hermeneutics' (Hietanen et al., 2022, p. 169). Perhaps this suggests that new alliances and collaborations will be necessary that extend beyond CCT's traditional supposed and desired affiliations with anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural theorists. What meaningful conversations can be had with other areas of the University including informatics, mathematics, engineering, and biological and genetic science? Maybe it will soon be time to pluck up the courage to even knock on the doors of the econometric contingent of our business school neighbours (or at least arrange something on Zoom) and once again look to explore alliances with economics, business analytics, and statistics. Or then again, perhaps this remains too romantic a gesture, even for CCT.

**Acknowledgements:**

We thank Anthony Patterson for his insightful thoughts and encouraging comments on an earlier version of this editorial. We would also like to express our gratitude to the *Journal of Marketing Management's* editor in chief, Mark Tadajewski, who offered a wealth of guidance, expert advice, and interest that helped bring this special issue to life. By working closely with the editorial office of JMM, Anne Foy and Fiona Lees, we have gained an invaluable appreciation for why this journal remains a mainstay for critical, rigorous, and imaginary research within marketing scholarship. Lastly, we are infinitely grateful to the reviewers who generously gave their time to offer substantive feedback and suggestions to the contributors who submitted their daring and imaginative work for this special issue.

**References**

Andéhn, M., Hietanen, J., & Lucarelli, A. (2020). Performing place promotion—On implaced identity in marketized geographies. *Marketing Theory*, 20(3), 321-342.

Ahlberg, O., Hietanen, J., & Soila, T. (2021). The haunting specter of retro consumption. *Marketing Theory*, 21(2), 157-175.

Akaka, M. A., Vargo, S. L., & Schau, H. J. (2015). The context of experience. *Journal of Service Management*. 26(2), 206-223.

Arnould, E, Press, M, Salminen, E and Tillotson, JS (2019) Consumer Culture Theory: Development, Critique, Application and Prospects. *Foundations and Trends in Marketing*, 12 (2). pp. 80-166.

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868-882.

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2007). Consumer culture theory (and we really mean theoretics): Dilemmas and opportunities posed by an academic branding strategy. In R. W. Belk & J. F. Sherry Jr (Eds.), *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Vol. 11, pp. 3–22. Oxford Elsevier.

Arnould, E. and Thompson, C. (2015) 'Introduction: Consumer Culture Theory: Ten Years Gone (and Beyond)', in A. Thyroff, J. Murray, and R. Belk (eds) *Consumer Culture Theory: Research in Consumer Behavior*, Vol. 17, pp. 1–21. Bingley: Emerald.

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2019). Consumer culture theory. In F. Wherry & I. Woodward (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of consumption* (pp. 95–126). Oxford University Press.

Askegaard, S., & Linnet, J. T. (2011). Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory: Phenomenology and the context of context. *Marketing Theory*, 11(4), 381-404.

Askegaard, S., & Scott, L. (2013). Consumer culture theory: The ironies of history. *Marketing Theory*, 13(2), 139-147.

Bajde, D. (2013). Consumer culture theory (re) visits actor–network theory: Flattening consumption studies. *Marketing Theory*, 13(2), 227-242.

Baudrillard, J. ([1983] 2008). *Fatal Strategies*, Trans. P. Beitzhman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard ([1968] 1996). *The System of Objects*, Trans. J. Benedict. London: Verso.

Belk, R.W. (1991), "The history and development of the consumer behavior odyssey", in R.W. Belk, (Ed), *Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey* (pp. 1-12.), Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.

Belk, R. (2017). Consumer Culture Theory. In M. Keller, B. Halkier, T.-A. Wilska, & M. Truninger (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of consumption* (pp. 13–24). Routledge.

Belk, R., & Sobh, R. (2019). No assemblage required: On pursuing original consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, 19(4), 489-507.

Bode, M., & Østergaard, P. (2013). 'The wild and wacky worlds of consumer oddballs': Analyzing the manifestary context of consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, 13(2), 175–192.

Botez, A., Hietanen, J., & Tikkanen, H. (2020). Mapping the absence: a theological critique of posthumanist influences in marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(15-16), 1391-1416.

Brown, S. (1998). Romancing the market: Sex, shopping and subjective personal introspection. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 14(7), 783-798.

Brown, S., Clarke, B., & Doherty, A. M. (1998). *Romancing the market*. London: Routledge.

Brownlie, D. and Hewer, P. (2007), Concerning marketing critterati: beyond nuance, estrangement, and elitism, in M. Saren, P. MacLaran, C. Goulding, R. Elliott, A. Shankar, and M. Catterall (Eds), *Critical Marketing: Defining the Field* (pp. 44-68). London: Elsevier.

Bridgman, T. (2007) 'Reconstituting Relevance: Exploring Possibilities for Management Educators' Critical Engagement with the Public', *Management Learning* 38(4): 42539.

Brisman, A., & South, N. (2014). *Green cultural criminology: Constructions of environmental harm, consumerism, and resistance to ecocide.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Carrington, M. J., Zwick, D., & Neville, B. (2016). The ideology of the ethical consumption gap. *Marketing Theory*, 16(1), 21-38.

Churchman, C.W. (1967). Guest editorial: Wicked Problems. *Management Science* 14(4): B–141-B142

Cluley, R., & Dunne, S. (2012). From commodity fetishism to commodity narcissism. *Marketing Theory*, 12(3), 251-265.

Coffin, J. (2021). Machines driving machines: Deleuze and Guattari's asignifying unconscious. *Marketing Theory*, 21(4), 501-516.

Coffin, J., & Egan-Wyer, C. (2022). De-Romanticising Critical Marketing Theory: Capitalist Corruption as the Left's Žižekean Fantasy. *Journal of Marketing Management*, https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2021.1996445

Cronin, J., & Fitchett, J. (2021). Lunch of the last human: Nutritionally complete food and the fantasies of market-based progress. *Marketing Theory*, 21(1), 3-24.

Cronin, J., Hadley, C., & Skandalis, A. (2022). Plastic: a passengerial marketplace icon. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2030319

Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Fitchett, J.A., Patsiaouras, G., & Davies, A. (2014). Myth and ideology in consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, 14(4), 495-506.

Gabriel, Y. (2015). Identity, choice and consumer freedom–the new opiates? A psychoanalytic interrogation. *Marketing Theory*, 15(1), 25-30.

Graeber, D. (2011). Consumption. *Current Anthropology*, 52(4), 489-511.

Hietanen. J., Ahlberg. O., & Botez, A. (2022). The 'Dividual' is Semiocapitalist Consumer Culture. *Journal of Marketing Management*, https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2036519

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Mol, J. (2014). Non-representational marketing theory. *Marketing Theory*, 14(4), 377-394.

Hill, T., & McDonagh, P. (2020). *The Dark Side of Marketing Communications: Critical Marketing Perspectives*. Routledge.

Holbrook, M.B. (1985) "Why Business Is Bad for Consumer Research: The Three Bears Revisited", in *Advances in Consumer Research 12*, eds. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Morris B. Holbrook, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research: 145-156.

Hoang, Q., Cronin, J., & Skandalis, A. (2021). High-fidelity consumption and the claustropolitan structure of feeling. *Marketing Theory*, https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931211062637

Hopkinson, G. C., & Cronin, J. (2015). 'When people take action….'Mainstreaming malcontent and the role of the celebrity institutional entrepreneur. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(13-14), 1383-1402.

Jones, S., Cronin, J., & Piacentini, M. (2020). The interrupted world: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality. *Marketing Theory*, 20(4), 459-480.

Joy, A., & Li, E. P. H. (2012). Studying consumption behaviour through multiple lenses: an overview of consumer culture theory. *Journal of Business Anthropology*, 1(1), 141-173.

Karababa, E., & Ger, G. (2011) 'Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject', *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(5): 737–760.

Lambert, A. (2019). Psychotic, acritical and precarious? A Lacanian exploration of the neoliberal consumer subject. *Marketing Theory*, 19(3), 329-346.

McKay, A. (director) (2021). *Don't look up*. Netflix.

Price, L. (2017). Consumer culture theory: A front-row seat at the sidelines. In O. Kravets, P. Maclaran, S. Miles, & A. Venkatesh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of consumer culture* (pp. 179–193). Sage Publications.

Rokka, J. (2021). Consumer Culture Theory's future in marketing. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 29(1), 114-124.

Saren, M. (2015). 'Buy buy Miss American Pie' The day the consumer died. *Marketing Theory,* 15(4), 565-569.

Shankar, A. (2009). Reframing critical marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 25(7-8), 681-696.

Shankar, A., & Zurn, P. (2020). On teaching curiosity. In P. Zurn & A. Shankar (Eds.), *Curiosity studies: A new ecology of knowledge* (pp. 269–289). University of Minnesota Press.

Sherry, J. (2014). What did you do in the great paradigm war? Notes from the other side. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 6(3): 405-413.

Siebert, A., & Giesler, M. (2012). Market System Dynamics: The Value of and the Open Questions Associated With Studying Markets in Consumer Culture Theory, in Z. Gürhan-

Canli, C. Otnes, (Juliet) Zhu, R., *Advances in Consumer Research 40* Association for Consumer Research: Duluth. pp.1096–1097.

Svetličič, M. (2021). COVID-19: The Child of Globalisation or the Mother of De-Globalisation?. *Teorija in Praksa*, 58(3), 860-881.

Tadajewski, M. (2010). Critical marketing studies: logical empiricism, 'critical performativity' and marketing practice. *Marketing Theory*, 10(2), 210-222.

Tadajewski, M. (2022). On being critically oriented in precarious times: for resistant curiosity. *Journal of Marketing Management*, https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2021.2016892

Tadajewski, M. & Brownlie, D. (2008). Critical marketing: a limit attitude, in M. Tadajewski and D. Brownlie (Eds), *Critical Marketing: Issues in Contemporary Marketing* (pp. 1-28.). Wiley: London,

Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton; Princeton University Press.

Wickstrom, A., Denny, I., & Hietanen, J. (2021). "Something is missing": Melancholia and belonging in collective consumption. *Marketing Theory*, 21(1), 75-92.

Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2012). A predictably obedient riot: Postpolitics, consumer culture, and the English riots of 2011. *Cultural Politics*, 8(3), 465-488.

Žižek, S. (1997). *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2006). Philosophy, the "unknown knowns," and the public use of reason. *Topoi,* 25, 137–142