Market Research and Socio-Political Consciousness in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper investigates the case of the eminent British market researcher and social scientist Mark Alexander Abrams (1906 – 1994). Abrams’ career as a researcher spanned the six decades between the late 1920s and the late 1980s, and it bridged the gap between commercial market and consumer research on the one side and governmental social research on the other. By focusing on Abrams’ research strategies and career moves over these six decades, the paper establishes an alternative historical narrative to those that privilege the impact of capitalist market structures on the making of marketing as a professional field and academic discipline in the twentieth century.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on archival research, the paper firstly establishes the biographical details of Abrams’ life and work. Secondly, the paper uses methodological and theoretical tools of historical sociology in order to investigate whether Abram’s biography was indeed typical for that of an entire generation of British and émigré-American market and consumer researchers. Thirdly, the paper searches for similarities in the biographies of these researchers and points out to what extent the collective biography of this generation harbored a specific socio-political consciousness which thus contributed to the making of modern marketing.

Research limitation/implications – The implications of this research are twofold. The paper provides for the first time a fuller insight into the social-generational and intellectual mechanisms that formed the backdrop to the emergence of modern market research in Britain. Secondly, the paper provides the corner stones of a collective social and intellectual biography of early market researchers. Both steps provide implications which challenge the lack of a meta-narrative of twentieth-century marketing.

Keywords – Market Research, Consumer Research, Marketing History, Consumer Empowerment, Socialism, Biography, Milieu, Generation, Narratives.

Paper Type – Research Paper.

Introduction
Mark Alexander Abrams, born in London in April 1906 as Max Alexander Abramowitz as the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, was one of twentieth century’s most important market researchers and social scientists that (most) people perhaps have never heard of. His life and career, which took him from Britain to the United States and back, exemplifies that a considerable portion of the generation of market research pioneers in Europe had a socialist background which in some cases included a specifically religious element. To different extent, members of this generation applied the conviction stemming from this background in their daily research practice and thus shaped the nascent discipline of market and consumer research in the image of an ideal society.

To British market researchers, Abrams is somewhat of a ‘father’ of their discipline (Kutner, 1978). After studying at the London School of Economics under the eminent statistician, economist and social researcher Arthur Bowley, Abrams continued his studies at the Brookings Institute in the US from 1931 to 1933. Upon his return to London in 1933, at the age of 28, Abrams began to work in the statistics and research department at what was then Britain’s largest advertising agency, the London Press Exchange (LPE). With Abrams on board, the LPE quickly turned into an important hub for market and consumer research. Among Abrams’ most important early surveys was a multi-volume readership survey of magazines and newspapers, the first of its kind in Britain. At the same time, Abrams applied the new method of long-term consumer panel surveys for the first time in the British market. For LPE’s clients Cadbury’s and Fry’s, together the largest chocolate makers in Britain, Abrams carried out regular product testing with panels of consumers. At the outbreak of war in 1939, he left the LPE and began to apply novel consumer and media research techniques first at the BBC and later at the Psychological Warfare Board. In these positions, Abrams studied the effects of enemy
propaganda and German bombing campaigns on the civilian population, and he assessed the impact of British and American propaganda material on the home population. After the war, Abrams returned to the LPE. In 1946, he agreed with his superiors to separate the agency’s market and consumer research division and turn it into an independent company, Research Services Ltd (RSL). Under Abrams, RSL became one of the largest European market research companies with subsidiaries in all major European markets and in Australia. A year later, Abrams became President of the newly founded Market Research Society (MRS), and from 1959 to 1960 he acted as President of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR).

While these cornerstones of Abrams’ career single him out as a key figure in the establishment of market and consumer research, and thus also of marketing, as a professional field in Europe, Abrams made his mark as a fervent supporter of socialist politics, too. Although his ethos as a statistician and his position as a director of a research company precluded him from joining any political party as a member, Abrams was known to have strong links to the British Labour Party, for which he conducted numerous opinion polls during the 1950s and 1960s. In this role, Abrams had a direct influence on the way the Labour Party formulated many of their party manifestoes and the arguments they developed to ‘sell’ the policy of nationalizing major industries after the war (Abrams, Rose and Hinden, 1960; Schwarzkopf, 2011). From the 1960s onwards, Abrams directed his efforts more and more towards using his research skills and his company’s staff for the purpose of bringing the needs of consumers, especially those of often neglected sections of the consumer market, to the attention of policy makers and regulators. For Abrams, ‘consumer power’ meant more than just spending power and the availability of choice between products, but included a level playing field between consumers and producers. Fully empowered consumers, in the mind of Abrams and that of many on the Left, were those who had influence over the way markets were structured in the first place (Abrams, 1959; Abrams, 1982). Abrams pursued these essentially political aims in his role as the Director of the Survey Unit at the then Social Science Research Council between 1970 and 1976, as the Research Director of the charity Age Concern between 1976 and 1985, as Vice-President of the Policy Studies Institute between 1978 and 1994, and in his role as an advisor for the British Consumers’ Association.

A Pioneer Generation
At first sight, Abrams life and career as a socialist and leading market and consumer researcher seems a contradiction. Yet, in reality Abrams was only the leading member of an entire generation of British market researchers who successfully bridged the gap between commercial market research on the one hand and social research on behalf of government and public bodies on the other. Abrams was not so much an exception but rather typical for a specific social milieu which gave rise to professional market research in Britain and other parts of Europe in the early and mid-twentieth century. This milieu consisted of mostly lower middle-class and middle-class Jewish and Christian socialists with close relationships to the Labour movement. Examples of members of this milieu include the two Presidents of the Market Research Society, Henry Durant and Louis Moss, both Marxists during their days at the LSE and later while leading the British Gallup Poll organization; Robert Silvey, a Christian Socialist who brought Mark Abrams to the LPE and who later headed the BBC’s Audience Research unit; Harry Henry, a socialist since student days at the LSE and later one of Britain’s foremost media and consumer researcher; Marie Jahoda, market researcher under Paul Lazarsfeld in Vienna and in Britain, one-time wife of Mark Abrams, and later Grand Dame of European socialism; and many other market and social survey researchers, including Mass Observation’s Tom Harrison; the social statistician and anti-Apartheid activist Sir Roger Jowell, and the household panel researcher and Christian socialist Tony Coxon. The American equivalent to this constellation of political concerns and interest in marketing and social survey methods can be found in Robert and Helen Lynd (Schwarzkopf, 2014), and in members of the same milieu who emigrated to the United States, like Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Herta Herzog and Ernest Dichter – all committed Marxists in their youth and key figures in the development of market and consumer research from the 1930s onwards.

Milieu, Generation and Consciousness
A close investigation of Abrams’ life and career allows us to use the biographical method to highlight key moments and people in the history of market research in particular and of marketing science more generally. While the strengths of this method have been pointed out for example by Jones (1998), its limitations are also clear. While the biographical method often provides rich historical detail, wider historical developments often remain diffuse as ‘outstanding personalities’ are singled out to represent
the development of the marketing field as a whole. The political and cultural values that structure this field are then are in danger of remaining ignored. Historical sociology, in contrast, provides marketing historians with a number of theoretical tools to use the advantages of the biographical research method while avoiding the pitfalls of a concentration on ‘great men’. The concepts of milieu, generation and consciousness help embed the biographies of prominent market and consumer researchers in the appropriate historical context (Mannheim, 1952; McMyler, 2005; Mills, 1959). The application of a historical-sociological focus not only on Mark Abrams himself but on the entire social milieu from which he emerged, the generation he belonged to and the socio-political consciousness this generation developed then also produces insights which enable marketing historians to create historical narratives that allow to make sense – historical sense and narratives in the way Jörn Rüsen, Gérard Genette, Hayden White others have defined these – of the development of marketing in the twentieth century. Such overarching historical narratives are in short supply despite continually rising interest in the history of marketing.

One of the many possible historical narratives that fits the biographical material on Abrams and other members of his generation is that market research, a key element of modern marketing, did not just emerge within the context of capitalist markets and the interest of firms to increase their competitiveness in these markets. Instead, key protagonists like Abrams and key research tools like the household panel survey and the interview-based qualitative research survey emerged within, and also helped foster, a specific social-intellectual milieu that predestined researchers to take the promises of socialism and of religion into the market arena, where they worked towards a kind of empowerment of consumers that is different from the way mainstream marketing thought today imagines consumer power. These insights, in turn, might inform contemporary marketing science by widening the space it has to reflect on its own intellectual commitment strategies. In other words, the fact that marketing science and marketing researchers today are not explicitly Christian or Jewish socialists does perhaps not mean that this field has not developed an alternative socio-political consciousness.

References