Galbraith and Glasser:
Two Scotsmen – One Misunderstood and the Other Unknown

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John Kenneth Galbraith
The Affluent Society (1958)
The New Industrial State (1967)
Economics and the Public Purpose (1973)

Ralph Glasser
Planned Marketing: Policy for Business Growth (Macmillan, 1964)
The New High Priesthood: The Social, Ethical and Political Implications of a Marketing-Oriented Society (Macmillan, 1967)

If you are not already familiar with the Beloit College Mindset List [1], let me both introduce you to it and recommend it. It is always a stark reminder of the distance between you and your students. This coming autumn term, for example, my students will have been first year college or university students in 2011. From the list Mindset List of 2011 I learn, among other things, that to them, 2) Humvees, minus the artillery, have always been available to the public, 4) they have never “rolled down” a car window, 13) “off the hook” has never had anything to do with a telephone, 21) Eastern Airlines has never “earned their wings” in their lifetime, 23) Wal-Mart has always been a larger retailer than Sears and has always employed more workers than GM, 35) Stadiums, rock tours and sporting events have always had corporate names, 45) they learned about JFK from Oliver Stone and Malcolm X from Spike Lee, and 70) Food packaging has always included nutritional labeling.

My point is this: I must not assume too much about my audience. This is important today because I don’t know who, in this audience, will know of the two people about whom I will speak. I should hope that you will know of John Kenneth Galbraith, because, as xxx said in his obituary for Galbraith, he was “one of the most widely read authors in the history of economics” and The Affluent Society was “one of those rare works that forces a nation to re-examine its values.” If you have ever used the phrases “affluent society” or “conventional wisdom” you have been using phrases coined by Galbraith. My biggest fear (and disappointment if I am correct) will be that many of you do not know of Galbraith and that those that do have not read anything he wrote (and there were many opportunities as he wrote thirty-three books).

I fully expect that you will not know of Ralph Glasser, despite the fact that he published several biographically based books and two books on marketing. He was referred to in the obituary published in xxx as “economist, a psychologist, and an adviser to developing countries.” It has not been mentioned, as far as I have seen, that he was a marketer, despite having published two books on marketing and was, at some point, chair of The Marketing Society in the United Kingdom.

The first of his two books, Planned Marketing, was a textbook. The other, The New High Priesthood, was about the social, political and ethical impact of a marketing oriented society. I say I fully expect that nobody in this audience will know of Ralph Glasser because I have never seen him referenced or cited and nobody I have asked has ever heard of him, even those that I most expected to have heard of him.

Alas, I will proceed on the assumption that you know of neither.

When I think of marketing and social criticism, before No Logo, I think immediately of John Kenneth Galbraith, the Canadian born American economist of Scottish ancestry. Galbraith was, in many ways, a social critic. He does, to many, seem to be critical of marketing, too, but he was actually most critical of his colleagues in economics for their refusal to take the discipline of marketing seriously. Galbraith, you see, was not critical of marketing. He actually acknowledged marketing for
what it is, and for what marketers, themselves, in their less guarded moments, said it was. He was giving marketing its place in the sun.

If you read what Galbraith actually wrote and what those that responded to him actually wrote, several things become apparent. First, economists responded with eloquent denials of his argument. I will discuss why they did so, and it has to do with defending a belief system. Second, those marketers that did reply to Galbraith only seemed to deny it. Once one gets past the self-protective and self-defensive rhetoric, it is clear that the marketers that did responded to Galbraith did not really disagree with him. They only appear to disagree with him, but actually do so by (strangely) supporting his argument.

Unlike Galbraith, Ralph Glasser (a Scottish Scotsman) wrote a frontal critique of marketing – a critique that virtually everybody seems to have missed. I have never seen a reference to and have never seen a citation of either of Glasser’s books: Planned Marketing (1964) nor The New High Priesthood (1967). Those references and citations are certainly out there; I have to find them. I did find a one-column inch review of The New High Priesthood in TLS: Times Literary Supplement in June of 1969. But other than the obituary, that is all I have thus far found.

In this presentation I will review what I have learned of Glasser, the nature and content Planned Marketing and but delve more thoroughly into the Social, Ethical and Political Implications of a Marketing-Orientated Society, (the subtitle of The New High Priesthood), at least as he saw it and presented it.

Like everybody, Glasser used metaphors. That is evident in the title of his second book on marketing: The New High Priesthood. He explained his use of this metaphor in the first paragraph of the introduction (p. 9):

High priests are possessors of the keys to certainty, guides to the pursuit of the desirable life; they also use their key positions and means of persuasion to mould the natures and aspirations of their peoples in ways that will render easier their own high task of leadership, fashion the dreams and fantasies of their followes to make for a way of life congenial to the high priests’ strategic vision.

This book is about a new high priesthood that has subtly usurped the role of leadership in society from those who hitherto have seemed to occupy it unchallenged – that is, in so far as the pursuit of the “good life” is concerned – the religious and political leaders. I will show how the evolution of our modern free economy has necessarily brought the marketing function in business into a dominant role in the formation of patterns of living and thereby in the unthinking acceptance of certain types of personal goals and ways of behaviour as being more desirable than others.

Certainly this should be a provocative metaphor.

The subtitle to his book, “the social, ethical and political implications of a marketing-oriented society” (emphasis added) suggest Glasser has some sort of evolutionary or developmental sequence that might mirror the traditional schema of a production, sales, and marketing oriented era. And he does. He wrote about and how the “marketing function plays [a] key part in changing our society,” and that “the role of the marketing function has changed from selling what can be produced to that of designing products and environments to the searching aspirations of men and women” (p. 16). That change is one from “a production-oriented to a marketing-oriented society” (p. 16). He wrote, in 1967, “many people may say that there is no new principle here, and that anyone who wants to sell anything must insure that it suits the intended market, … that no one in his senses ever tried to sell anything unless he felt sure there was a market for it. Quite so” (pp. 16, 17). Nonetheless, he adds, “There is a great difference, however” (p. 17). A close reading reveals, to me at least, a more nuanced understanding of the three-eras schema than presented in our textbooks – or even of the critics of the three-era schema.

Those familiar with economic history and the history of economic thought know that the period from 1820-1920 served to bring us both the modern corporate dominated economic system and the theory of monopolistic competition. They will also appreciate this passage (p. 182):

Advertising’s true role, therefore, is twofold: to maintain the non-price character of monopolistic competition, and to continue the expensive struggle between the giants for market shares – rather like the virtually perpetual territorial wars fought between the feudal
lords in medieval times, wars in which the serfs, like the anonymous consumers of modern
times, merely provided the revenues!

His concern, here, is repeated later:

People are coming to be regarded merely as ‘things to buy products’, existing to serve the
production process, rather than the production process existing to serve people.

How he reaches this and other of his conclusions regarding the social, political and ethical implications
of a marketing oriented society will be explored.

Notes

References
Glasser, R. (1967), The New High Priesthood: The Social, Ethical and Political Implications of a
Marketing-Orientated Society, Macmillan.