

Activist Marketing Literature in Canada between the 1940s and 1980s: Societal Context and Stages of Development

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This abstract reports on a work in process that explores three related issues:

1. Is there a separate activist school of marketing thought or is the activist stream of thought better viewed as a component of another school?
2. What, if anything, is there unique about Canada that helped to shape activist marketing thought in that country?
3. What issues received particular attention in the body of literature on Canadian activist marketing thought?

Each of these issues is explored in turn below.

An Activist School of Marketing Thought?

From the perspective of marketing science, activism represents empirical research and socio-political thinking related to consumerism issues and consumer welfare (Kotler, 1972). With roots back in the 19th century, activism as a concept in marketing emerged in the earlier half of the 20th century. This direction of studies was influenced by the efforts of consumer advocates focusing on malpractices in marketing in an attempt to rectify imbalance of power between sellers and buyers in the marketplace (Beem, 1973).

Academics disagree as to whether to consider activism a distinct school of marketing thought. The classification meta-theory appraisal scheme (Sheth, Gardner and Garret, 1988) recognizes the activist school of thought, but argues that it suffers from difficulties in testability. Jones and Shaw (2005) subsume activism under the macromarketing school. Some other researchers choose to treat activism as a component of a Postmodern Marketing with a societal “focus of attention”- rather than as a school of thought (Brown, 2004, 2006; Randall, Miles, and Randall, 2004). And, finally, activism is considered in some studies as one of the components of a “collaborative marketing” school (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

In a broader socio-historical context activism was in high degree inspired by the critical social theory that was developed in Western Europe in 1930-s and was oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, rather than only to understanding or explaining it. Later on marketing activism performed a role of one of the sources of critical marketing that emerged in 1980s and was aimed at fueling positive social transformation. Critical scholars scrutinized the role of marketing and advertising in the repression of individuality and highlighted the importance of advertising and marketing as socialization agents (Tadajewski, 2010).

In spite of its theoretical nature being under question, activist thinking is appreciated as having tremendous societal value. Over the time, scholars and marketing practitioners developed within its framework several socially important streams of research including those dealing with malpractices in marketing like deceptive advertising and product labeling information (Gardner, 1976; Ford and Calfee, 1986), consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Anderson, 1977; Hunt and Day, 1979), disadvantaged consumers (Ashby, 1973; Andreasen, 1975), and marketing ethics (Robin and Reidenbach, 1987).

What factors unique to Canada shaped Canadian activist literature?

Activism in marketing in Canada is an organic continuation of the political and social traditions of the country. It reflects peculiarities of Canada's historical development, public attitudes, traditions and cultural norms. In Canada in the 20th century the ideals of social democracy and responsibility traditionally occupied a much more central role in political, social and economic thought than it did in most of other democratic societies (Morton, 1961). During the Post World War II decades an emphasis on the social responsibility of business started to emerge in scholarly research studies, educational programs, mass media materials and public activities as well as in the acts of legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power. During the post-war decades Canada has been a world leader in terms of the adoption of corporate responsibility standards, the addressing of social and environmental concerns in a broad range of industries, and in the development of corporate governance practices (Horowitz, 1966).

Some researchers emphasize that Canada was to a higher degree "touched" by the ideas of European socialism than was the U.S. (Horowitz, 1966). The presence of Tory ideology brought to Canada by the Loyalists, an influential and legitimate socialist movement in Canada as contrasted with the illegitimacy and early death of American socialism, and the failure of English-Canadian liberalism to exclude Toryism and socialism as "un-Canadian" are claimed to be the major "un-American characteristics" of Canada. The major reflections of this trend in the 1940s and 1950s were the journalistic publications, the public speeches of politicians and the scholarly research papers advocating a greater equality of opportunity to be brought about by destroying monopolistic privileges and regulating the economy (Hartz, 1955, 1964; Horowitz, 1965, 1966).

The spirit of some of the scholarly studies was influenced by the emergence of political forces such as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a Canadian Congress of Labour that advocated public ownership of key industries, and the introduction of such social welfare measures as universal pensions and healthcare, children's allowances, and unemployment insurance. This left-wing influence gave rise to studies researching the possibility of a centrist reconciliation between free market society and social security (Ross, 1954; Lipset, 1964). Theories such as Fabian Socialism, Distributism, Keynesian economics, and Tory democracy generated research advocating a more active government role in monetary and fiscal policy (Blisshen, 1964). The social responsibility approaches, present in the 1940s-50s mostly in the macroeconomic literature, started to emerge in some aspects of the marketing literature on advertising, pricing, and retail chain management (Thompson, 1958). These studies gave birth to what we call a Canada-specific activist perspective of marketing.

Further changes in the Canadian political and economic landscape in 1960s and 1970s such as the creation of the New Democratic Party, a Consumers' Association of Canada that contributed to public policy decision-making and support for consumer reforms; and the passage of socially oriented initiatives such as pension indexing, a national health care system; and the establishment of the publicly owned Petro-Canada facilitated the development of new approaches to marketing (Dawson, 1963; Goldstein, 1979). At that time several provinces moved to create local consumer protection legislation, perhaps the most comprehensive of which was the Quebec Act creating a Consumer Protection Bureau and Consumer Protection Council (Holland, 1972; Wyckham, 1979).

What activist issues received particular attention?

This trend of movement to the left in economic policy found its reflection in Canadian academia. Consumerism, environmentalism, and the social externalities of marketing became common themes of research. In the 1960s they were reflected in a number of studies related to consumer behavior, retailing, wholesaling, and international marketing issues (Litvak and Mallen, 1964, 1965, 1968), advertising and promotion (Stace, 1964), pricing (Ohlson, 1968), and government regulations (Henry, 1965). In the 1970s the activist approach is evident in marketing studies related to government taxation, regional incentives, pollution controls, and fair employment practices (McCready, 1972; Brown, Dunn, and Savitt, 1976; Hiller, 1976). Also, energy use and conservation issues became critical areas of public policy, thus leading to studies on consumer energy consumption patterns, informed consumer purchasing and the effectiveness of energy conservation policies (Haines et.al., 1979; Shapiro, 1978). Overall, in contrast to the post-war period of 1940-50s, the period of the 1960s and 1970s can be called a time of "specialization" in activist thinking. The focus moved from a macro perspective to a far more specialized one.

Developments of activism stream of thought in Canadian marketing in the 1980s

The period of 1980s was marked by the increasing acceptance of the social responsibility concept, a development that had a significant impact on scholarly research in leading Canadian educational and research institutions. In the 1980s, activist research in Canadian marketing became a diverse and multidimensional phenomenon. Some of the directions of its development are worth special consideration.

Nationalism, International marketing and global business

By the 1980s the significant changes in the global political environment influenced the spirit and the direction of research in international marketing. Canadian academic interest was attracted to such subjects as a marketing perspective on ideas of national unity (Cameron, 1979), humanitarian objectives in international trade (Litvak, 1984; Hillman-Cartrand, 1989), why ethical values were required in the field of multinational marketing and the need to build international relationships based on moral considerations (Kirpalani, 1980; MacGregor, 1988), and the ethical codes that should shape the actions of multinational corporations (Neufeld 1995).

Agricultural marketing

The farm crisis and the "grain trade war" of the 1980s made the issue of the health of Canada's agriculture and food industries an important research field both in industry and academia. The activist perspective found its reflection in research on the topics of government intervention designed to support farm income and keep farmers on the land (Carby-Samuels, 1985), on providing marketing support to Canadian farmers (Lane, 1987; Furtan, 1987), and on the redistribution of income in the agricultural sector through the use of marketing regulations (Lerner and Stanbury, 1985).

Regional marketing

The disparity in economic development between the different Canadian provinces together with the debates about the appropriate balance between federal and provincial power gave a strong impulse to research in the area of Canadian regional marketing. The activist perspective at that time dominated such research topics as individual consumer preferences and public policy issues in light of federal-provincial relations (Heslop, 1979), the protection of local businesses in marketing their products within their provinces (Stevenson et.al, 1987), the feasibility of empowering provinces to exercise more control over pricing policies (Wolfman, 1985), and federal support and preferences related to marketing internationally products that originated in economically lagging provinces (Plain and Haukedal, 1981).

Healthcare

The 1977 Medical Care Act and the Canada Health Act of 1984 changed the landscape of a Canadian health care system, which for years had been subject to wide-ranging criticism. Though being essentially pragmatic, healthcare policies were defined clearly in terms of the public interest and the primary concern was on helping to balance the family's budget rather than the government's. The associated activist stream of research focused on such topics as public control of the income of hospitals, comparative analysis of the administrative costs of the Canadian publicly funded system vs. the co-insurance public-private U.S. system (Hatcher 1978), stimulating competition in the pharmaceutical industry (Segal, 1979), and problems of confrontation between government and influential health care providers (Vayda, 1988).

Conclusion

The history of marketing activism in Canada in the 1940-80s encourages question: what ideas for social change in consumers' interests can be productive in other than Canada cultural contexts? We believe that the social attributes that lead to the development of activist perspective in marketing and can be productive in other cultures are:

- traditions of openness towards other cultures and immigration flows;
- left-wing forces well represented in political life and mass media;
- traditions of maintaining links of business educational and research institutions with public entities aimed at protection of consumer interests;
- development of a wide network of federal, provincial and municipal grants aimed at facilitating the scholarly research in the area of consumer interests protection and making it prestigious and

rewardable;

-development of public institutions and social improvements (e.g., accessible healthcare) that implement the ideas of social justice in the society and go in parallel with socially-oriented research in marketing and other business disciplines.

Overall, the historical and political traditions of Canada and the peculiarities of its social and economic environment provided a fertile soil for generating, developing and popularizing activist marketing literature. The growth of that literature was further facilitated by a unique “marketing and society” interaction in Canada that must be both recognized and appreciated.

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