

Choice, ‘Calling’ and the Market as *Ersatz* Religion: Early Twentieth-Century Market and Consumer Researchers Seen Through the Weber – Merton Thesis

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The Argument

The sociologist Max Weber famously argued that the rise of modern capitalism was the result of the emergence of a particular religious ethos during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Weber, 1904/1905). His contemporary Werner Sombart equally attributed the emergence of new types of economic and business behaviour, like double-entry bookkeeping, to changes in religious doctrines and practices in the late medieval period (Sombart, 1902). The German school of historical sociology raised many questions about the possible connections between innovations in business methods on the one hand and religious sentiments on the other.

Much of the historiographical debate that engaged with Weber’s and Sombart’s theses has focussed on entrepreneurship in general, accounting, firm structures, and on changes in business-government relationships. Some sociologists and historians, like Colin Campbell (1987) and T. J. Jackson Lears (1994), explicitly engaged with the Weberian framework in order to explain the rise of modern consumer culture. These accounts strongly focussed on explaining the possible origins of hedonistic aspects of modern consumerism, including its visual and material culture. The professional and scientific aspects of *marketing*, in contrast, as a set of practiced business methods as well as a way of theoretically perceiving economic relationships between market actors, have not attracted the same interest of historical sociologists interested in the relationship between religious ethos and business practices. In this paper, I will address the possible linkages between the emergence of modern marketing techniques, the Protestant ethic and rational lifestyle (‘*Lebensführung*’) in bringing about innovations in marketing theory and practice. Adapting Weber’s and Sombart’s approach, I argue that some techniques of modern consumer marketing, especially market and consumer research, have their origins in secularized religious techniques and dispositions, more specifically in the inner-worldly asceticism of early-modern Protestantism and the ethics and eschatology of European Judaism.

The Historiographical Problem

It has been generally accepted by business historians that the first decades of the early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of market and consumer research in its modern form. As shown by Roland Marchand, Peggy Kreshel, Theodore Porter, Susan Herbst, Jean Converse and others, market research itself became more widely practiced from about 1910 and then further grew during the Progressive Era when statistical methods and the applied social sciences became more fully appreciated in public life. It has also been widely accepted that the interwar years saw the development of more and more consumer-oriented forms of business research, resulting in the establishment of advertising psychology and consumer research as a staple of advertising agencies, market research companies and many product planning departments in consumer goods industries.

Curiously, early market and consumer researchers, their motivations and embedding in social and intellectual traditions have rarely been studied by historians of marketing. Wherever a closer look is taken by historians, such as in Douglas Ward’s recent study of Charles Coolidge Parlin, early market researchers are often seen as outstanding, individual characters and innovators with an unusual gift (Ward, 2009). Historical explanations of the rise of modern market and consumer research thus often create a *demand*-led narrative: the growing availability of branded products in increasingly crowded consumer markets, and continuously growing consumer income etc., meant that companies needed tools to create and filter market information and reconnect to more anonymous mass markets. These narratives give little insight, if any, into the motivations of those individuals who promoted the

development of consumer and market research. In other words, the *supply*-side story of the emergence of modern market and consumer research is missing.

Study and Methodology

In order to throw more light on the historical actors who first invented and then ‘sold’ the idea of market research to the business community about a hundred years ago, a study into the first generation of market researchers as a ‘thought-collective’ (Fleck, 1979) is proposed here. In this study, which uses the prosopographic method of studying the common characteristics of large social groups, the motivating role of religious sentiments is taken more seriously. A prosopographical view on the first generation of market and consumer researchers unearths a number of fascinating insights. The demand-side oriented historical narrative as described above points at American and large-scale, specifically metropolitan companies which first took interest in the new methods of market and consumer research. For instance, the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia, the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency in New York, and General Motors in Detroit were globally among the first to invest heavily in market and consumer research from as early as 1911. Yet virtually none of the early pioneers of market and consumer research had a distinctly metropolitan American background. In contrast, most key individuals in the early history of this branch of applied social and business research were outsiders to the world of metropolitan America and had either a rural background in the American mid-West, as in the cases of Elmo Roper and George Gallup, or a Jewish-European background. It can also be shown that key individuals who first developed market, consumer and advertising psychological research, like Charles Coolidge Parlin, GM’s Henry Grady Weaver and Walter Dill Scott, had a specific religious background either rooting in what Weber called the ‘Baptist sects’ or alternatively, as in the cases of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Ernest Dichter, in Judaism.

This finding raises questions of a kind similar to those provoked by Max Weber’s thesis about the origins of the ‘spirit’ of capitalism and secondly, those provoked by Robert Merton’s work on the influence of German Pietism and English Puritanism on the making of the experimental sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Merton, 1938). In order to address these questions, this paper inquires whether religious ethos as individual motivation, the key focus of Weber’s historical sociology of modern capitalism, is a useful concept to explain the rise of market and consumer research. Further, a hypothetical counter-argument will be introduced which presents religious affinities not as a primary motivating factor but as a set of rhetorical strategies which the early generation of market and consumer researchers used in order to legitimize their activities in a market that was unfamiliar with these new business statistical tools. Following this particular hypothesis, I trace the role of religious notions of (professional) ‘calling’, ‘judgment’, ‘consciousness’, and ‘freedom of choice’ in the making of consumer research methods at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Because research methods that relate to the political economy of capitalism needed to make intuitive sense to those who developed them and advocated their use, early promoters of research methods such as the questionnaire technique, the focus group, consumer panels, consumer juries etc., relied heavily on religious rhetoric in order to embed these untried methods in the market order and create public legitimacy for them. By the interwar years, the political economy of capitalism increasingly demanded more consumer focus. Companies came under competitive pressure to relinquish parts of their controls over resources and transfer these controls to anonymous, aggregate consumer demand by investigating consumers’ preferences. At the same time, the moral economy of capitalism was still very much structured around notions of authority and many business leaders abhorred the idea of referring economic decisions to the anonymous crowd. Early British and American advocates of market and consumer research, who often came from a specific religious background, were therefore perhaps much more likely to use religious rhetoric, one that foregrounded the ‘sacred’ status of the individual consciousness and of individual judgment, in order to create legitimacy around new, costly, untested, and potentially unreliable research methods in a business environment.

In a third step, the argument in this paper will be related to Robert Merton’s 1938 thesis about the role played by Pietists and Puritans in the emergence of the experimental sciences. Since early market and consumer researchers often stressed the ‘scientific’, that is the inductive and empirical character of their techniques and methods; a Mertonian perspective on early market and consumer research is worth debating. This is even more the case given that the science history community has debated the Merton

thesis intensively during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a debate not yet matched by the marketing history community (Cohen, 1990; Shapin, 1988).

Contributions to Historical Research in Marketing

This paper attempts to relate Max Weber's, Werner Sombart's and Robert Merton's theses more directly and more closely to the early pioneers in market and consumer research, an extremely interesting and influential group of people at the interface between modern consumer capitalism and the empirical social sciences. The paper will therefore be of interest to both marketing and science historians. The wider historical analysis of the personal motivations and ideas of marketing professionals will be of interest to researchers and students beyond the boundaries of marketing history because the concepts that underlie the teaching and research of marketing are often so deeply rooted in cultural and intellectual traditions that a fully critical reflection is impeded. The paper also contributes to the discussion of the problem whether 'Western' cultural and religious traditions give modern marketing tools a shape that make it difficult for these tools to be applied in non-Western contexts without causing frictions of a social-cultural nature.

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