BREAKFAST IN DETROIT ECONOMICS, MARKETING AND CONSUMER THEORY 1930-1950

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ABSTRACT

Consumer theory struggled to establish itself in the early years of the twentieth century, and made little real contribution to marketing thought at that time. The core of the problem lay with the uneasy relationship which had developed between marketing and economics with respect to utility, value, consumer preference formation and consumption. These tensions, and a growing lack of communication between the two disciplines were, at first, largely ignored, but by the 1930s the gap which had opened up between marketing practitioners on the one hand and economic theorists on the other had, for some, become too great to ignore. This paper identifies the causes of tension which had developed over the years, and looks at the attempts made by consumer economists to repair the damage and to achieve some reconciliation of ideas. In particular, it describes events in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when concern over the relevance and direction of consumer theory reached a peak.

INTRODUCTION

In a paper presented to the American Marketing Association in 1938, Harry Tosdal, a Professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Business Administration, criticised the "huge gap" which, in his opinion, had developed between academic economists and the business community with respect to the study of consumer demand. Academics, argued Tosdal, had, for the most part, been apparently unwilling or unable to consider the central importance of the consumer in their work, with the result that they were contributing little, if anything, to the analysis of market opportunities and to the solution of business problems. Unlike psychology, which, in Tosdal's view, was contributing substantially to a better understanding of consumer demand, economics seemed incapable of addressing the issue.

To some extent, this poor performance was attributable to historical factors which, over many years, had produced an understandable complacency on the part of economic theorists, for in the later nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, there had been little reason to be concerned about consumers and their preferences. Market conditions and demand/supply imbalances were such that manufacturers had experienced little difficulty in finding buyers for their products and services, and it had always been assumed that "if goods were produced they would be sold". After the First World War, however, conditions had changed markedly- greater competition and a growing consumer awareness of their market power was tilting the balance away from production and towards consumption.

The response to Tosdal's well-founded criticisms was immediate. In December, 1938, a breakfast meeting of economists was held in Detroit. Chaired by Professor Benjamin Andrews of Columbia University, it brought together those who had particular interests in consumer studies and in the development of more rigorous and commercially relevant theories of consumption and consumer demand. Selected proceedings were later published in the *Journal of Marketing* and elsewhere.

For those assembled in Detroit, the overview of consumer economics must only have served to demonstrate the size of the task in front of them. First, it was undeniable that economic theorists had, indeed, neglected consumer economics to an alarming degree, for in 1938 the corpus of consumption theory bore little relevance to market realities. To understand why and how economics had so clearly failed to keep abreast of changing market conditions, it is necessary to look in some greater detail at the evolution of economic theory over the preceding fifty years.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN CONSUMER THEORY

In the early years of the twentieth century, little work of any significance was being done on consumption and consumer behaviour. The orthodox neoclassical treatment of consumer demand focused on marginal utility theory, derived from a hedonic calculus which was, even at that time, proving to be increasingly impotent in the face of changing market conditions. Adherence to neoclassical interpretations of consumption was most evident in Britain, where the influence of Stanley Jevons, Alfred Marshall and the neoclassical school was at its strongest. In the United States, there was less certainty about the universal "truths" of neoclassical theory, and a far greater willingness to challenge conventional interpretations of consumer behaviour. Academics trained in the German School of historicists, well represented in American universities, had no confidence in orthodox approaches to consumer theory, but their alternative view, based on historical-inductive observation rather than on theoretical-inductive reasoning, nevertheless failed to deliver an alternative theory of behaviour which had general application.

Among the few economists at this time to have a particular interest in consumption was Simon Patten, whose *The Consumption of Wealth* was first published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1889. Patten, however, was always seen as an outsider, insisting, as he did, that consumer economics had to be informed by modern psychology if it was ever to properly explain the conduct of people when faced with the necessity of making choices.

In 1892, Patten's *Theory of Dynamic Economics* attacked John Stuart Mill and Jevons for almost totally excluding consumption from economic discussion. When it was included, he argued, theories of consumption bore no relation to observed market behaviour. These protests, however, carried little weight, for, in 1890, Alfred Marshall had published his *Principles of Economics* and neoclassicism was reaching its zenith. Patten was to return to the attack again in 1907 and 1909, but to little effect.

While academic interest in consumption was negligible, the popular imagination was caught in 1899 with the publication of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen explored the nature of a widespread and continuing tendency of individuals to purchase and consume for status (a tendency which, by now, had been widely recognized and exploited by the business sector). However, his book was seen by many only as an attack on the behaviour of the very rich, and the more serious underlying analysis was neglected. Although an economist, he was often labelled a sociologist by more orthodox economists, and this contributed to the neglect of his work within the discipline. Overall, Veblen's immediate impact on the development of economic theory was negligible, although he was later to be seen as one of the founders of the Institutional School of economics which continues to this day.

Through the first twenty five years of the new century, there was little work of any significance on consumption economics. Some few persisted in warning that patterns of consumer behaviour which could be easily observed in the marketplace went unexplained within economics. Among these critics were several prestigious economists of the day- Schumpeter, Mitchell, Wieser, J.M.Clark- all of whom expressed similar reservations about the treatment of consumption within economics. For the most part, however, orthodoxy prevailed and interest in consumer economics was pushed to the edges of the subject.

The paucity of work in the field of consumption had its effect on marketing academics. Marketing was, before 1910, seen as no more than a sub-set of economics, and this had a strong influence on the nature and direction of marketing research. Lacking any significant literature on the economics of consumer behaviour, marketing specialists understandably focused on supply-side issues, where there was already a substantial body of research and where neoclassical interpretations were less controversial. The years after 1910 saw the development of the functional school of marketing, emphasizing marketing activities and transactions; the institutional school, concerned with product distribution and with the management of marketing channels; and the commodity school, which focused on product management. None of these schools of marketing thought looked at consumer behaviour in any detail.

While economic analysis of consumer demand was minimal, interest in the behaviour of markets was growing strongly in the business community, which had everything to gain from a better understanding of why people buy. This interest was sustained and increased not by academic economists but by psychologists who, in the years after 1920, published extensively on the mental processes of individuals as consumers and on the application of psychological principles to advertising and selling.

After 1920, occasional voices within economics continued to question the relevance of hedonistic interpretations of consumer demand (Frank 1924; Knight 1925; Florence 1927), but mainstream economics continued to deny any shortcomings in neoclassical analysis. Veblen made his last major appeal for a reconsideration of consumption theory in 1925, but there was little response. Some work on consumption was occasionally appearing. Kyrk (1923) applied conventional economic theories of value in an attempt to explain consumer desires and their intensity. In 1928, Hoyt wrote on the consumption of wealth from the perspective of cultural anthropology and Waite drew together some of the material which had been used up to that time by what few university courses in consumption had been developed. Work on the economics of consumer behaviour, however, was still totally inadequate.

In the early 1930s, there were some who challenged certain aspects of neoclassical analysis, but these reservations and criticisms related in the main to theories of monopoly and competition. The influence of advertising and salesmanship on consumer preferences was given some greater recognition (Robinson 1933; Chamberlin 1933). Robinson was also unhappy with marginal utility theory, arguing that it was "a purely formal conception which may be, in some circumstances, devoid of any real or interesting meaning", and this was seen to be particularly true when social and psychological characteristics influenced demand.

To make any significant progress with consumer theory, the dominance of neoclassical theories of value, utility and consumer preference formation had to be broken. Additionally, contributions from economic anthropology, sociology and psychology needed to be incorporated into economic theories of demand. In the event, the dominance of traditional utility theory was broken, but the "new economics" worsened rather than improved prospects for a theory of consumption which could satisfactorily explain the market behaviour of the 1930s and make a more significant contribution to the needs of an increasingly sophisticated business community.

The break with neoclassical utility theory came in 1934, when Hicks and Allen launched an attack on the concepts of utility and marginal utility as adequate explanators of consumer demand. However, their alternative approach did little to further the interests of consumer researchers. At face value, one development was potentially promising, for they proposed that any proper study of demand could never sensibly focus on a single product but should instead concentrate on the interrelated demand for complementary and competitive goods. All market experience suggested that consumers did, indeed, make purchase decisions in this wider context. However, Hicks and Allen had, in fact, explicitly set out to remove what little "psychology" there was in marginal utility theory, and their indifference analysis moved demand theory further away from competing behavioural theories of consumer preference formation by focusing on price, income and budget constraints as the prime determinants of choice between products. Nowhere also in their analysis was mention made of interdependent preferences or of any interpersonal effects on demand: social dimensions of consumer choice were entirely neglected.

By 1935, therefore, it was not possible to reconcile the "new" economic theories of consumer preference formation with observed market behaviour in America and Europe. In 1936, Zimmerman developed an alternative theory of consumption based on budget studies carried out in the early 1930s and this was well received. However, it did nothing to explain consumer choices and how they were made, following instead an earlier tradition (Nystrom 1929] in providing an essentially factual book based on income and family expenditures. In reality, it offered little of immediate value to marketing practitioners. And with the publication of Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* in 1936, interest swung even more sharply away from microeconomic issues and towards macroeconomic interpretations of consumption and the propensity to consume. Ironically, Keynes was a strong critic of the neoclassical treatment of consumption, arguing that far more emphasis would, in future, have to be put on subjective determinants of demand (habits, instinct, culture and social ambitions) if any theory was to be credible. At the time, however, he was preoccupied with macroeconomic problems, and took this particular criticism no further.

Tosdal was right, therefore, to argue in 1938 that consumer demand remained a much neglected area of research and instruction. Paradoxically, however, 1938 was witnessing a far greater interest in the subject. New texts on consumption economics appeared in that year (Hoyt 1938; Vaile and Canoyer 1938) and developments in retailing were generating significantly greater interest in the economics of consumer behaviour (Coles 1938; Reid 1938). While this greater interest was clearly welcome, economics still lacked a credible microeconomic theory of consumption and consumer behaviour, and was continuing to fall behind psychology and other behavioural sciences in attempts to describe the process of consumer preference formation. Not surprisingly, many of those who had rekindled some interest in consumer economics in the later 1930s were sufficiently concerned to respond to Tosdal's challenge and to accept the invitation to meet for breakfast in Detroit in December, 1938.

At Detroit, books on consumption which had appeared since 1920 were reviewed by Hazel Kyrk of the University of Chicago. Kyrk was one of the few academics whose interest in consumer economics extended over some twenty years and whose *A Theory of Consumption* (1923) was an early, well-received attempt to analyze utility theory in relation to observed consumer behaviour.

The review of consumer economics was honest in conceding that work to date, including Kyrk's own contributions, had struggled to find a proper understanding and definition of "consumption". Hoyt's *Consumption of Wealth* and Waite's *Economics of Consumption*, both published in 1928, had been written as text books rather than as research monographs, and were more concerned with drawing together what limited literature then existed than with proposing and developing a base for future theoretical and empirical study. Zimmerman's 1936 book had been more ambitious but, again, had been relatively weak on theoretical explanation.

The Detroit review focused also on more recent publications which were attracting some attention. Wyand's 1937 *Economics of Consumption*, again written primarily as a teaching text, had concentrated on consumers as buyers in the retail market, and was a forerunner of the books published by Coles and by Reid in the following year. Kyrk suggested that interest in retailing had, in fact, been so strong that studies of the retail customer had come to dominate the field of consumption from the early 1930s onward.

In 1938, Hoyt's *Consumption in Our Society* and Vaile and Canoyer's *Income and Consumption* had been published, and were both reviewed. Hoyt was criticized for her inability to put sensible parameters around the subject, for the book looked at the psychology of choice and at the welfare implications of consumption, moving then to problems of measurement and to an appraisal of the contemporary economic situation from the standpoint of the consumer interest. It then looked at monopolistic practices, tariff policies, and more. The book, in short "found it difficult to know where to stop; the discussion tends to run away and become a...survey of our whole institutional set-up". What it was not, implied Kyrk, was a detailed study of consumption and consumer economics at the level of the individual.

Vaile and Canoyer's work was similarly criticized for wandering away from the real subject. "Consumption measured is real income measured in specific kinds and amounts of goods and services", argued Kyrk, "and valuable as this approach to the economic problem may be, what has become of the field called consumption?..Has the study of consumption become the study of economics in general?" (1939, p.18).

Kyrk's Detroit paper was later expanded to include a review of Waite and Cassidy's *The Consumer and the Economic Order* which was published early in 1939 prior to publication of the Detroit papers and proceedings in the July 1939 edition of the *Journal of Marketing*. This book, argued Kyrk, was no more than a greatly expanded edition of Waite's 1928 *Economics of Consumption*, and she was highly critical of what she saw as a meaningless change which added little to existing knowledge:

> Is the economics of consumption the same as the economic problems of the consumer or something else? Are the economic problems of the consumer largely *the* economic problems? Is "consumption" something more or something other than "economics of" or "economic problems of"? (1939, p.18).

The Detroit meeting conceded that much specialist literature (especially on advertising), which often contained substantial sections on consumers and on the economics of consumer demand, had not been examined in any detail. But while contributions to a very limited debate had, from time to time, appeared over the years to 1938, these had been too diverse and unstructured to pull the subject together in any meaningful way. There seemed to be little, if any, evidence of a disciplined, common approach and the meeting was left to wonder "what the field of consumption was in the light of the developments of the previous ten to fifteen years?".

While Detroit served, for the most part, to confirm Tosdal's view of consumer economics as ineffective and confused, it nevertheless served to heighten interest in a neglected subject. Reviews, however, continued to be highly critical. In 1939, George Burton Hotchkiss of New York University, echoing Tosdal's complaints, dismissed Hoyt's 1938 book as superficial in the extreme. In particular, it showed a pronounced lack of respect for, or interest in, the work of marketing academics who, to Hotchkiss, had a major contribution to make:

> It would also be a courtesy to the scholars who are devoting their years to the scientific study of Marketing to accept their evidence as of higher validity than the testimony of some anonymous trickster or the findings of a research student based on an analysis of one issue of three (or six) magazines (Hotchkiss 1939, pp.88-89).

The distance between Hoyt and Hotchkiss only served to demonstrate how disorganized the field of study was and, later in 1939, the American Marketing Association invited Theodore Beckman to chair a second round table discussion on consumer economics. At the Beckman meeting, Kyrk repeated her general criticisms of the literature and her specific criticism of Hoyt. On this occasion, Elizabeth Hoyt was invited to reply.

Kyrk had been particularly critical of Hoyt's treatment of choice and consumer preference formation, and Hoyt conceded that this question was "the single most important one of all those suggested by Miss Kyrk's paper". However, in responding, Hoyt retreated again to cultural anthropology (the basis of her 1928 book) as offering the greatest potential for future research and, having advocated this broader, cultural approach to consumer decision-making, did not then see economics as the underpinning research discipline in so far as consumer theory was concerned:

> I am inclined to think that the theory of gestalt psychology, which has hitherto been applied in much simpler problems, has undiscovered possibilities in relation to the choice-making process. Most choices are made in relation to already established configurations or to future goals, and the increased or decreased satisfactions they introduce are derived not merely from the particular good or service chosen but also from the changes in one or many total situations which are thus brought about. The "other things remaining equal" of traditional marginal utility analysis is in life never the case. Folk wisdom tells us that the loss of a nail may be the loss of a kingdom and one straw may break a camel's back; and we economists having learned to reason without such realism must now learn to reason with it (1940, p.119).

Cassady also, replying to criticisms of *The Consumer and the Economic Order*, agreed that there was much that remained to be done and, like Hoyt, did not see that economics alone could make any serious additional contribution. Cassady, in effect, supported a shift into interdisciplinary research as the only sensible way forward:

> What is needed, probably, is an institutional study carried on by cooperating economists, psychologists, anthropologists, physiologists et al. Perhaps then some of the "unsettled questions" may not only be talked about but answered (1940, p.123).

Overall, the principal conclusion of the Beckman round table, revisiting consumer economics one year after the Detroit meeting, was that future research would, of necessity have to be multidisciplinary if any real progress was to be made towards a better understanding of consumer behaviour and consumer preference formation. Second, there would have to be a far greater interest shown in consumer theory than had hitherto been the case. Most importantly, however, the lack of structure and direction which had typified work in the subject for over a decade would have to be finally ended.

THE RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

The Detroit meeting and its immediate aftermath served to demonstrate the extent of academic confusion relating to consumption and consumer demand. However, events after Detroit saw little change of substance.

First, while the overview of consumption literature since 1920 was instructive, it was concerned, for the most part, with a literature that lay outside the mainstream of economics. The challenge facing marketing specialists at Detroit was to engage with those who saw themselves as being well within the conventional economics tradition, and to then open a dialogue which could establish a new consumer theory within, rather than at the edges of, the discipline. Orthodox consumer theory had come through the neoclassical tradition, and had then been supplanted, in part, by the indifference analysis of Hicks and Allen and, increasingly after 1937, by Paul Samuelson's early work on consumer theory, subsequently drawn together and published in 1947 (*Foundations of Economic Analysis).* There was general agreement among marketing specialists that these developments in consumer theory were moving economics away from, rather than toward, the realities of market behaviour in the middle of the twentieth century. The overriding need in 1938 was to create a greater interest in consumption within the mainstream and to generate a far wider, more inclusive debate about the need for new approaches to the subject. In the event, Detroit failed to take the opportunity and, by default, helped to confirm consumer behaviour's continuing status as a relatively unimportant issue lying largely outside mainstream economics. Complacency towards consumption and the consumer was, in fact, to continue within economics for many years after 1940, and it was not until 1949, with publication of Duesenberry's *Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behavior*, that any renewed interest was taken in the more heterodox aspects of the subject.

Second, Detroit lost an opportunity to involve a far wider spectrum of marketing economists in consumer theory, for notwithstanding the interest of a small minority, marketing had, for the most part, been driven by supply-side issues since the 1920s, and this emphasis continued after 1940. Marketing's continuing lack of interest in matters relating to consumption was quickly evident. In 1944, Robert Bartels attempted to encode a body of marketing principles for future research, defining a principle as "an element of science falling between specific observation and theory". Observation and experience, he argued, were the prerequisites to thought which organized itself as theory; and principles based on observed facts linked the two. In reviewing such principles in the economic and marketing literature, however, he could find no reference to consumption and consumer behaviour. More significantly, looking to the future, and particularly to future theoretical constructs, he himself saw no urgent need for the development of principles relating to consumer decision-making and preference formation. One year later, in 1945, Paul Converse sampled 45 marketing scholars representing 37 universities and research organizations across the USA. Again, he found minimal interest either in consumer theory or in the work of mainstream economists. The divorce between economics and marketing was clearly becoming more severe, partly because of the complacency of the economists generally, but also because of a pronounced lack of interest on the part of marketing specialists. As the marketing literature of the 1940s clearly indicates, Detroit again failed to stimulate any greater debate over the coming decade.

Finally, as has been shown, the consensus at Detroit and at the subsequent Beckman meeting was that economics needed to develop strong multidisciplinary links in order to promote a new agenda for future research into consumer behaviour. This, by any criterion, represented a major challenge, for economics had always resisted any suggestion that it should, or needed to collaborate with other social and behavioural sciences to explore the nature of consumer demand.

The view held by mainstream economists was that economics was essentially concerned with the outcomes of individual behaviour and choices relating to purchase and consumption, but that the motives underpinning such outcomes were the proper, and separate, business of others, principally anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists. Kyrk, Hoyt, Cassidy and others had all concluded that it was necessary to integrate economics into more structured, interdisciplinary studies of consumption if any real progress was to be made, and Detroit could have provided a greater impetus towards achieving such changes. In the event, little changed: research through the 1940s continued to be discrete and compartmentalized, and the historic tensions between what were, in reality, highly complementary disciplines, continued to be much in evidence. These tensions were to persist for many years to come, culminating eventually in the formation of the Association for Consumer Research, dominated by the behavioural sciences, a development which tended to institutionalize the problem even within marketing itself.

SUMMARY

The Detroit meeting of 1938 represented a potential watershed in the development of consumer economics within marketing, for it formally recognized that economic theory and marketing thought had drifted apart to an unacceptable degree by the end of the 1930s. Through the 1940s, however, no greater emphasis was placed on consumer studies- to the contrary, interest in the subject can be considered to have declined in real terms. Economics began to turn increasingly towards more mathematical, econometric analyses of markets and consumer demand, while marketing itself showed little inclination to address the subject with greater urgency.

As Bartels (1965) pointed out, for the span of the Second World War, the lines of thought which were already manifest in the 1930s (mostly concerned with supply-side issues) continued to dominate marketing, and this trend broadly continued after 1945, as a greater managerial emphasis then attempted to draw together the functional, institutional and commodity schools of marketing into one coherent whole. While some were increasingly unhappy with marketing's contribution and direction [Alderson & Cox, 1948], little attention was given to the need for a more comprehensive and relevant explanation of the economics of consumer behaviour.

Economics, in truth, never happily accommodated marketing as a sub-set of the discipline, and this was evident as early as the 1920s: Academic differences and a marked lack of communication between the two were, in fact, to persist throughout the twentieth century. The breakfast meeting in Detroit recognized the problem, but ultimately achieved little in bringing the two sides together and in developing a theory of consumer economics with which Harry Tosdal would have felt comfortable.

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