

A farewell to ahistoricism

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The Routledge Companion to Marketing History

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595

The Routledge Companions in Business, Management and Accounting set themselves up as reputable reference works providing “an overview of a whole subject area or sub-discipline”. Indeed, they are offered as a work of reference, a “go to” volume that may provide the best insight or initiation into a subject, field or perspective, a “one-stop-shop resource for each theme covered”. This edition, relating to marketing history, without doubt achieves that. Its range is vast and the detailed and comprehensive nature of the coverage is impressive. It is international in its scope, offering nine country-specific histories and a full array of specific marketing practices from market research, packaging and retail, through distribution, competition and anti-trust law, and selling and sales management. It is easy to imagine how this volume will quickly establish itself as the first port of call for anyone wanting to understand the basic features and factors of these areas of history. Thus, Schwarzkopf provides a thorough introduction to the history of market research, identifying the key moments and players that are likely to stimulate, guide and inform further research. Fullerton draws on a great reservoir of knowledge to present a condensed range of observations and findings pertaining to segmentation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Meanwhile, it is difficult to imagine a better entry into the specifics and facets of US anti-trust law and EU competition law than the respective chapters of Petty and Pressey. However, to my mind, the greater value of this volume lies above and beyond what is so usefully provided in this manner. These *Routledge Companions* endeavour to offer a “survey of the state of the discipline” and the judicious selection of chapters by Jones and Tadajewski really brings this to the fore.

The gauntlet is thrown down in Jones and Tadajewski’s introduction where they reflect on, and challenge, Fullerton’s lament that marketing is ahistorical (p. 1). The chapters provided here offer ample evidence that the discipline is well beyond that and now embraces the very best of historicism. At the time of writing, hordes of undergraduates are on the cusp of beginning history programmes in the UK. Many will do so with Tosh’s perennial *The Pursuit of History* by their side via which they might understand the foundations and philosophy of the discipline. In there, Tosh observes:

Historians are not the guardians of universal values, nor can they deliver “the verdict of history”; they must strive to understand each age on its own values and priorities instead of imposing ours (Tosh, 2015, p. 6).

The historicist cherishes the socio-cultural context of the moment, and many of the chapters in this book do this so well in painting vivid pictures of the interconnections between the society and times upon which they report, the activities and practices which grow out of that and, in their turn, shape those moments. The historicist appreciates historical periods on their own terms and develops an understanding of the topic, be that packaging, selling or advertising, relative to the times within which they occurred. For Munslow:

[...] events, actions and thoughts should be appreciated set within their specific historical moment [...]. By this argument historians empathise with the social conditions that gave rise to actions that occurred at a particular place in time (Munslow, 2000, p. 130).

Marketers today surely appreciate the fallacy of:

[...] universal values, and not only learn from the past but equally appreciate how methods and practices developed over time, were informed by the age in which they occurred, and how contemporary context is key.

The chapters in this volume do the editors proud in dispelling the spectre of ahistoricism. Marketing is firmly embedded in and integrated with the past, not set up as an adjunct to it. Further, those practices are shown, in their turn, to influence and shape the past. In this fashion, marketing scholars will certainly find this volume enlightening and informative. However, I also hope that historians will more broadly read parts of it and come to appreciate how past cultures and societies can be understood through the marketing practices of the time. For example, Sreekumar and Varman's chapter on marketing in India demonstrates how trade was driven in the ancient period by the "diversity of soil and climate" necessitating trade to obtain goods from the outside, which could not be produced at home, tipping a nod to the *Annales* School (p. 390). The point is further reinforced by Alexander, with reference to Reillo (2006), where he notes the shift in the new millennium away from merely studying processes and practices in retail to appreciate the wider milieu in which these are played out:

The history of retailing is no longer the historical analysis of practices, shops, or products. It appears, instead, as the historical investigation of the rationality and strategic actions that influenced consumers, producers and retailers (Riello, 2006 quoted in Alexander, p. 157).

The chapters in this volume clearly establish how acquisition and the exchange of goods has been and remains fundamental to humankind. The topics covered are scenes of power, influence and change. Tamilia plots how the rise of a merchant class from the eleventh to the eighteenth century "disrupted the feudal political system and diminished the power of the reigning monarchs and nobles who controlled the lives of people under the heavy influence of church doctrine" (p. 178). Shaw's chapter on ancient and medieval marketing, grounding the organisation of society relative to trading practices (pp. 24-26) is articulately set up while Witkowski's following chapter outlines how the history of consumption and the history of consumers not only reflects the context of the time but also acts as an agent of change in itself (p. 44).

These robust swipes at ahistoricism acknowledge those disruptive elements in history that have the power to banish theoretical projections or models. In a similar fashion, Petty clearly establishes how branding is not necessarily there to be studied merely because it occurs, nor to appreciate the intricacies and practices associated with it; Petty in fact takes an all-encompassing view which sees the need for branding as a consequence of circumstance and context, the confluence of events and developments,

which, in combination, create change. He cites the development of distribution by railroad in the US as giving rise to national advertising in newspapers and magazines (p. 110), developments which Twede also points to in the evolution of packaging (p. 117).

The Routledge Companion to Marketing History offers an excellent introduction to many aspects of the history of marketing but, more than that, this is a volume that triumphs the place of marketing as a conduit to social and cultural history; many of these chapters, whilst ostensibly histories of their respective disciplines and practices, are also great histories and reflections of the times upon which they report. Returning to Jones and Tadjewski's introduction they observe:

[...] exploring the development of marketing from a wider perspective indicates the extent to which marketing is affected by political, economic, technological, ethical and cultural change (p. 10).

This is well-captured in the chapters put together here and reflects not just the state of marketing history but key developments in social and cultural history in general, which triumph the agency of consumption through history (Daunton and Hilton, 2001; Hilton, 2003; Mort, 1996; Trentmann (2006, 2008, 2016). Perhaps the editors sell themselves short because these chapters do not just record how marketing has been affected by the times and environment within which it was conceived but also amply demonstrate how marketing has played a part in affecting and shaping the past. Thus, Boothman demonstrates how – with specific regard to retailing in North America – public space was fundamentally reconfigured (p. 144). Speaking for Britain, Alexander, in similar fashion, offers the department store as “a means to explore cultural and social, as well as economic, change” (p. 158). Meanwhile, Powers highlights the disruptive force of the travelling salesmen entering new spaces and places, bringing with them new ideas and insights (p. 227). Ultimately, Shapiro captures this spirit by drawing on the work of Brewer and Porter:

[...] our understanding of the development of western societies will remain dramatically impoverished unless we confront the fact that such polities, uniquely in world history, have come to revolve around the mass consumption of goods and services [...] it is imperative that we investigate in the most comprehensive way the links connecting this material culture [...] to the political and social systems with which it became symbiotic (p. 250).

This volume provides an excellent insight into “the state of the discipline” and serves to enrich our understanding of western societies in often surprising and unexpected ways. Whilst I have no doubt that this volume will be found indispensable in many business schools, I also hope it establishes a well-deserved presence in history departments as well. Should anybody be labouring under the notion that marketing is ahistorical, they should read this volume to appreciate the nature of historicism in the round.

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