Critical Theory in Consumer Research: Advancing the Conversation

Roundtable facilitator: Amanda Earley

Roundtable participants¹: Shona Bettany, David Crockett, Andrea Davies, Paul Henry, Andrea Lucarelli, Lisa Peñaloza, Craig Thompson, Alladi Venkatesh

Structured Abstract

Purpose
This paper reconsiders the role of critical theory within the field of consumer culture theory.

Methodology/approach
The paper is documentary evidence of a roundtable held at the 10th annual Consumer Culture Theory conference on the subject. The roundtable uses discussion and conceptual methods.

Findings
The author begins with a brief introduction to the use of critical theory in the academy and in CCT more specifically. In the course of the roundtable, it was discovered that the reason we do not talk about critical theory more often may be attributable to its success, rather than failure—indeed, it has inspired so many new academic traditions, that we rarely pause to think of the various critical traditions in one place. Building on this foundation, participants were asked to discuss what critical theory means to them; what theorists they have used; what engagement they have had with critical theory traditions in CCT; and what their vision for critical theory influenced consumer research would be. Participation came from both planned and emergent participants. The final conclusion was the felicitous discovery that critical traditions are alive and well in consumer culture theory, and that there are many pathways by which to pursue critical consumer research in the future.

Originality/value of paper
The roundtable session and paper are a direct response to the conference theme, which asked conference attendees to reflect on the history of consumer research, and specifically the role of critical theory within it. Moreover, the paper builds upon important debates about the philosophy of science and role of critical theory within consumer research.

Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Critical Theory, Transformative Consumer Research, critical marketing, politics of consumption, Frankfurt School, political theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial studies

¹ The facilitator would also like to thank Marylouise Caldwell, Güliz Ger, Jeff Murray, Julie Ozanne, and Bige Saatçioğlu for their thoughtful feedback and assistance. These five brilliant academics were hoping to attend, but ultimately were not able to come due to personal circumstances. In lieu of on-the-day participation, they provided invaluable advice during the planning stages of the roundtable. For this and many other reasons, their contributions to critical theory influenced traditions of CCT should not be forgotten.
Introduction

“[C]ritique assesses what exists, what might exist and what should exist...”
Norman Fairclough, 2010, p. 7

As noted in the quote above, and argued in our field by Murray and Ozanne (1991), the goal of critical theory is to consider the state of things, and how they could operate differently. It starts from the premise that society is unjust, and takes social change as its mission (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Moreover, it seeks to unite theory and praxis, elucidating not only an ideal picture of how society should operate, but also paths by which ideals can be realized. Inspired by this year’s conference theme, a roundtable was convened to reconsider the importance of these critical theory imperatives for the field of consumer research.

With the above noted, critical theory itself is at a crossroads—both within the discipline of consumer research, and within the academy more generally. As such, the roundtable began with a very brief introduction to the historical evolution of critical theory. To start, critical theory is generally agreed to have began with the “Frankfurt School” social theorists, so named as it was based at the Institution for Social Research in Frankfurt. The Frankfurt School sought to revitalize Marxist thought while interrogating some of its key premises, and is exemplified by the work of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. A defining moment in Frankfurt School history can be found in a much-cited essay by Max Horkheimer, which defined critical theory by a change orientation, in opposition to “traditional theory,” which is predominantly descriptive (1937).

Over time, critical theory has expanded tremendously—so much so that a great deal of critical theory is not recognized as such. Indeed, a critical impulse can be found in the work of political philosophers like Hannah Arendt; other Marxist-influenced scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and György Lukács; existential philosophers such as Sartre and Kierkegaard; feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Donna Haraway; continental philosophers such as Debord, Derrida, Lacan, Latour, Deleuze, and Guattari; British sociologists like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams; and perennial CCT favourites such as Bourdieu, Foucault, and Baudrillard. Critical theory is also a foundational influence in the fields of feminist science and technology studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, literary studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and queer theory. Most recently, critical theory has been inspirational to a new generation of political philosophers, including Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Jodi Dean, Henri Lefebvre, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek.

Given my short tenure in the field, I asked the roundtable participants to identify key moments when critical theory was productively used in consumer research. Contributions included Everett Rogers’ fellows address at the 1986 ACR on critical theory; the publication of Radical and Philosophical Thought in Marketing, and especially Bill Kilbourne’s writing on critical theory which appeared there; Mark Poster’s presentation on critical theory at the 1987 AMA; Murray and Ozanne’s 1989 AMA special session on critical theory; the exchange between Murray, Ozanne (1991; with Shapiro, 1994) and Hetrick and Lozada (1994), on critical theory in the Journal of Consumer Research; and Fuat Fırat and Alladi Venkatesh’s work on liberatory postmodernism (1995), and their establishing the journal Consumption, Markets, and Culture. Over time, critical theory has influenced the ACR and AMA; Macromarketing; Heretical Consumer Research; Transformative Consumer Research; Consumer Culture Theory; and Critical Marketing. A number of excellent uses of critical
theory in action can be seen in research projects over the last 20 years, including Julie Ozanne, Canan Corus, and Bige Saatcioglu’s work on deliberative democracy (2009); Sandikçi and Ger’s work on the politics of veiling (2009); and Karababa and Ger’s work on the formation of consumer subjectivity within the Ottoman Empire (2011).

Ultimately, we realized the perceived “decline” of critical theory in the academy and consumer culture theory can actually be read as a product of the field’s extraordinary success. By this, we mean that it has inspired so many intellectual traditions that we tend to think of scholars by newer, more “specific” labels, rather than thinking of them as simply “critical theorists.” While there is nothing wrong with this trend, in and of itself, we recognized that the critical politics of these fields are at risk of being forgotten or intentionally removed when we do not take time to reflect on their criticality. As such, the importance of roundtables of this sort was reinforced in a way that could not have been anticipated before the event.

Building on this foundation, roundtable participants were asked to present statements based on a series of questions. The questions were the following:

- What does critical theory mean to you?
- What critical theorists have you used?
- What critical traditions have you participated in, within consumer research?
- What is your vision for critical theory-inflected consumer research?

The rationale for pursuing such a “structured” format was to create an educational and encouraging atmosphere for PhD students and others new to the critical theory tradition, and indeed many commented that this roundtable format was illuminating and easy to follow.

**Planned Participants’ Comments**

I went first, to provide an example of the response format for other roundtable participants. I said that I ascribe to the broad definition of critical theory, and believe any of the theorists listed in the introduction can (and should!) be read as critical theorists. Indeed, I believe it is problematic to read scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu apolitically. Moving on from this, I stated that contemporary political philosophy has been the most influential to my work, and particularly the writings of Alain Badiou, as I find it provides a powerful theorization of consumer culture, and resistance to it. Finally, I argued that Norman Denzin’s (2001) original imperative that critical consumer researchers should “take sides”—specifically, the side of the consumer, rather than the manager—still holds today. As noted by MacInnis and Folkes (2010), this injunction was foundational to the field of consumer research, and is an essential dimension which differentiates consumer research from marketing research. As such, I argue that abandoning our investment in consumer welfare in favour of managerialist research is ultimately be dangerous for the field, as it raises questions about what consumer research has to offer over marketing research.

Shona Bettany provided the second commentary. She explained how she came to theory as a result of studying women’s studies and marketing simultaneously. In her women’s studies curriculum, she was urged to pick a theorist that “speaks to you” and your pain. She became interested in feminist critical theory, as she did not see herself as a struggling single mother represented within a marketing curriculum. In other words, those who are not “proper consumers” were being excluded from research. Ultimately, Bettany explains that she is interested in critical theory because it reveals what she can do to change the world. She is interested in feminist critical theory specifically because it is critical of the
journal system and power dynamics within disciplines. One example of this is the work of Audre Lorde, which she reads as critical theory in the form of poetry. Another example which she is taken by is the work of Donna Haraway, which was a critique of her own discipline. Shona works as an ethnographer of disciplines, and she is very interested in how CCT has often taken critical theorists like Gramsci, Haraway, and Bourdieu, used an intellectual germ of their theory, and discarded the critical dimension. Her vision for critical theory inflected CCT would be a discipline which honours the critical dimension of theory, and contributes actively to it.

Lisa Peñaloza spoke next. She explained how the environment that existed at UC-Irvine during her PhD program largely influenced her. Mark Poster was teaching at the time, and Derrida was visiting. Friends in other departments were studying Guy DeBord, Bourdieu, and Lacan. After Irvine, she went to Illinois, where Paula Treichler, Cary Nelson, and Larry Grossberg had formed the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, which also influenced her thinking. Both of these environments were a breath of fresh air, after undergraduate and MBA study in business. She could see that marketing was not doing enough critique, and that this is still the case. In her PhD, she became specifically interested in how people use the market to help with social causes, but also how people organize socially to change market systems. As a Latina, she was particularly interested in how Latino Americans were “discovered” in some parts of the market, and yet disenfranchised in others (e.g. the tourist district of San Antonio). Later in her career, she became particularly inspired by the writings of Chela Sandoval, who wrote the Methodology of the Oppressed (2000). Sandoval draws on the work of Paulo Freire, ultimately presenting a critical approach to semiotics. Most recently, Peñaloza has been interested in the banking crisis. She had noticed that Americans were buying big houses and big cars, and yet median incomes were not shifting, and was eager to understand the processes underneath, and ultimately the crisis inherent within the system.

Andrea Davies then spoke about how she sees critical theory as a tool that allows us to make the invisible visible, and to give voice to what has been silenced. Recently, she has been particularly interested in the notion of “zombie categories” (like gender, disability, work, and leisure) which do work, but not necessarily the work that we expect. It has given her a new way to think about her earlier research with Richard Elliott on gendered work in household labour. There, they found that the supermarket was couched in narratives of empowerment and choice, but that there was an equally important subtext which implied that housewives now engaged in more work and felt a greater sense of “responsibility” for their families’ wellbeing than ever before. Here, she came to critical theory through the European oral history tradition, and specifically the work of Paul Thompson. He argued that mundane, everyday stories can actually reveal much about power dynamics within society. In this case, while consumers discussed the supermarket in terms of “liberation,” it was also couched in a history of growing constraint, as it requires driving or transit—neither of which were required in the era of corner stores and grocer deliveries. More recently, she has looked at the category of disability within the context of a restaurant for the blind in the UK. She observed and interviewed diners, and found that they were horrified by the experience. She reads this through Kristeva’s notion of the abject, and ultimately argues that the restaurant’s “CSR” mission is a failure, in that the blind are given an object status rather than subjectivity. She ends by noting that critique has always been at the heart of interpretive consumer research, but that this is not always honoured, and that we need to do better work to engage with other disciplines.

Craig Thompson then discussed his process of coming to critical theory. He explains
that his PhD was largely devoted to trying to make sense of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the question of how agency is possible within broader social structures. He notes that within the existential tradition, there exists the concept of an inherent human will to resist power, and that is something that has influenced his work. His dissertation specifically was inspired by his own mother’s life struggles, and the way that women’s lives are mediated by the marketplace more broadly. He came to this specifically through histories of domesticity and housework, particularly the work of Susan Strausser, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, and Stevie Jackson. In these histories, he found that technologies which had promised to liberate women actually drew them into much more exacting regimens of household care, and redefined the nature of femininity and motherhood in the process. Next, he began reading the work of Susan Bordo and Donna Haraway. He wanted to learn how to think the way they did, and in turn he felt it was necessary to understand Michel Foucault to do so. Ultimately, he has been greatly influenced by Foucauldian, feminist-infused critical theory, and an abiding interest in power relationships. He notes that in Foucault each form of power also has an accompanying form of resistance. He adopts Foucault’s “hyperactive pessimism” (exemplified by the quote that “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous,” Foucault, 1982, p. 231) and reminds the audience that overturning one regime of power just brings new regimes of truth, and new forms of power. For him, critical theory is not about taking sides, so much as adopting an agnostic stance of trusting anything. The goal of critical work within such a perspective is to destabilize regimes of power, but be prepared for the new forms of power that will emerge in their place.

Alladi Venkatesh was the next to speak. He agreed with Lisa that it was a very special time at Irvine. He was a junior professor there while Lisa was doing her PhD. The place was full of incredible minds, including not only Mark Poster and Derrida but also visits from Gayatri Spivak, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. He says that students should really read Lisa’s dissertation paper—and Craig’s as well—as some of the most excellent work done in CCT is often done during one’s PhD. This is meant as a word of encouragement to the many PHD students in the audience. In the case of Lisa’s work, she had come to Alladi, saying that the Latino consumption she was observing was about resistance, at least as much as it was about assimilation. He recommended she read critical theory to make sense of the phenomena she was observing. Currently, in his own research, Alladi is very interested in theories of the “Other”, as a cultural, phenomenological, philosophical, and critical concept. Excellent work on the subject is coming out of Africa and China, and he strongly urged the audience to engage with this literature. He notes that excellent philosophical work in CCT has been done by European scholars, but he contends that the best critical work is now being done within the British marketing academy. He notes Douglas Brownlie, Chris Hackley, Avi Shankar, Mike Saren, James Fitchett, Stephanie O’Donnahue, and Margaret Hogg as leaders here. Craig adds Mark Tadajewski’s name to the list, and Alladi Venkatesh wholeheartedly agrees, and says that the members of the audience really need to engage with this work.

Paul Henry spoke next, saying that his interest in critical theory came from his concern with inequality and power. This is shaped by his experience in the Australian context, which is nominally supposed to be an egalitarian country, but is of course largely stratified by class and ethnic divisions. He finds it worrying that there is so little political action around class segregation in Australia, and this is something that he brings into his teaching. Other research on social class has focused on the education market in Cambodia. Corruption within this system has destroyed the whole country, as teachers take bribes before they teach classes where students actually learn the curriculum. Here, he notes that a patronage system is in place, which is a very different sort of class system from that which
exists in Australia. He has continued to observe the situation in the education market in Cambodia, which is now subject to greater regulation, but now faces new irregularities.

Andrea Lucarelli provided the next contribution for me. Considering the question “What is critical theory for me?”, he agrees with other participants that it is very personal. For him, it is influenced by his experiences growing up in Italy, as well as coming to Sweden to do a PhD. He reminds us that one’s background is always political. Different countries have different academic environments, and in turn different approaches to knowledge. He believes that critical theory is defined by the way you approach knowledge and knowledge production, and the way you write research. Lucarelli argues that writing research is a place where you have an impact—though writing need not be in academic journals, but also in news outlets or debates. Specifically, in his research, he is interested in how different concepts from consumer culture and marketing emerged, why we use them, how we use them, and the effect of such use. How different concepts from consumer culture theory and marketing came about. He is particularly keen on critical theory from the Italian tradition of biopolitics—especially the writings of Negri, Agamben, and Esposito. Building on Craig’s contribution, he says that the goal of the Italian biopolitical theorists is that they push forward the Foucauldian project. They are interested in questions such as: What is neoliberalism? Is it only a certain type of political economic project? Or is it something that is embedded in our humanity? Have we always been biopolitical? Andrea is specifically interested in working through these authors to unpack the concepts that we use in marketing and consumer culture.

David Crockett provided a shorter contribution, in the interest of time, and so that more audience members could participate. He started by quoting Gil Scott-Heron, who said that the job of a poet is to make a point; who needs a poet to make life more complicated? He sees critical theory as a useful tool to make things plain when possible. Specifically, he came to critical theory via racial formation theory, and an American black studies training more generally.

**Emergent Participants’ Comments**

Excellent comments were also made by a number of “emergent” roundtable participants. Murray Skees, who generally works in philosophy departments, discussed how critical theory proper is more of a method than a theory. Skees explained how critique (in the critical theory sense, as opposed to the Kantian “transcendental” sense) is “immanent”—in that it reveals contradictions already/actually existing between a society’s values and actual actions. Douglas Allen talked about how he views Bourdieu as a critical theorist, and explained difficulties he has encountered with scholars who disagree on this point. Senija Čaušević stressed the importance of bringing critical pedagogy (as explicated by Paulo Freire) and Saidian and post-Saidian postcolonial perspectives into consumer research. Delancey Garrett commented on the continued importance of critical perspectives on the racially-stratified nature of consumer society, in the wake of the recent massacre in Charleston, South Carolina. Jon Shapiro discussed the climate of the Association for Consumer Research at the time at which he, Jeff Murray, and Julie Ozanne were writing on the importance of doing critical-theory-based research (1994), and was glad to see just how many people were now interested in doing this sort of work. Laurel Steinfeld raised an important question about how to survive and be published as a scholar working from a critical theory perspective. It was noted that while the critical theory tradition in consumer research remains small, it is larger than ever before, and has greater support in a wide variety of publication outlets than in previous decades. All in all, the roundtable had an incredibly
positive and collaborative spirit, and ended with great hope for the future of critical consumer culture theory.

References:


**Author’s Biography:** Amanda Earley is a lecturer of marketing, politics and culture at the University of Leicester, UK. Her research focuses on the politics of markets, practices and subjectivities within consumer culture. She primarily does this work within the contexts of economic activism, food culture, social media, sustainable strategy and visual culture.

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