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Plenary Session on Macromarketing and Politics Roundtable on Macromarketing and Politics

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36th Annual Macromarketing Conference

College of William and Mary
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Plenary Session on Macromarketing and Politics Roundtable on Macromarketing and Politics

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Abstract:

In this conference presentation I draw on C.S. Lewis to make the point that newspapers, films, novels, and textbooks all undermine the macromarketing point of view. Every student in every class in all schools of business sees economics everywhere and by it they see, interpret, and understand everything else. That blocks a macromarketing perspective, a perspective that does not rely on *the market* and *the state* as the sole alternatives in the provisioning systems of societies (George Fisk’s widely referenced definition of *marketing* among the macromarketing community). To fully grasp that one must appreciate that *the market* is a *metaphor*.

I begin my part of this morning’s conversation with a passage from C. S. Lewis. This comes from “Christian Apologetics,” an essay in his *God in the Dock*. After I read this, I will re-read it, changing select words to make it relevant to this morning’s topic.

The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. Every newspaper, film, novel and textbook undermines our work. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy’s line of communication (more than just that). What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent. ... It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the

materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian.

I now read it, substituting select words to make the point for macromarketers.

The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the [macromarketing](#) point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. Every newspaper, film, novel and textbook undermines our work. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy's line of communication. What we want is not more little books about [macromarketing](#), but more little books by [macromarketers](#) on other subjects—with their [macromarketing orientation](#) latent. . . . It is not the books written in direct defense of [micromarketing](#) that make the modern man a materialist; it is the [micromarketing](#) assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on [macromarketing](#) that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to [some area of marketing](#), the best work [available](#) was always by a [macromarketer](#).

This idea, that “they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted,” is well captured by this next passage, also from C. S Lewis, but this time from *Is Theology Poetry?*

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

Again, substituting words for our present purposes, this becomes:

I believe in [economics](#) as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

My point is that every student in every class in the nation's schools of business sees *economics* everywhere and by it they see everything else. About that there can be little doubt.

This brings me directly, now, to macromarketers. For this I will refer to John Mittelstaedt, William E. Kilbourne and Robert A. Mittelstaedt's “Macromarketing as Agorology: Macromarketing Theory and the Study of the Agora.”¹ (Since the two Mittelstaedts are in the

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audience, I invite them chime in if they feel I misrepresent their paper.) Early in their paper they point out that, in general, marketing “owes much to microeconomics,” but that for intellectual and historic reasons, “macromarketing ... lies outside of this intellectual tradition” and is “distinct from neoclassical economics.” They then assert that it is questionable “whether any theory that contemplates a state of equilibrium is useful” to macromarketers and, further, that “despite the debt that micromarketing owes to neoclassical economic theory, it appears that the latter is not up to the intellectual task of characterizing competition in a realistic or useful way.” To be sure we don't miss their point they then add, “As we know, there have been criticisms of the ‘unreality’ of neoclassical economics for years,” and then immediately follow this casting off of economics as not very useful by stating, “we eagerly embrace neoclassical economic theory's conclusion of the superiority of markets governed by competition.”²

Whoa! Wait a minute! Several points need to be raised at this point. One is that you cannot accept the conclusions if you dismiss the model or theory from which those conclusions come. There is widespread agreement about this. Sociologist Richard Brown wrote, “The scientist who develops a theory in terms of a model cannot with consistency dispense with the model as though it were a ladder to be kicked away once the new theoretical plateau has been reached. The model rather is an ingredient of the theory.”³ The historian of science Thomas Kuhn similarly wrote, without the underlying model “one cannot even today write down the Schrödinger equation for a complex atom or molecule, for it is to the model, not directly to nature, that various terms in that equation refer.”⁴ Finally, the theologian/ philosopher Austin Farrer wrote, “Theology is the analysis and criticism of revealed images; but before you can turn critic or analyst, you need a matter of images to practise upon. Theology tests and determines the sense of the images and the conclusion I draw follows from the structure of the symbol I use, not from the structure of the reality it symbolizes.”⁵

In short, *you cannot get rid of the bathtub and still keep the bath water.* The conclusion that markets are superior (superior to what, they don't say, nor do they say for what purpose they are superior) is a theoretical conclusion. They say they “eagerly” embrace this conclusion immediately after they dismiss the theory from which it comes. But no neoclassical economic theory, no clear superiority of markets. If one is to claim that markets are superior *and* dismiss neoclassical economic theory then a new, a different, theoretical justification must be proposed. If you accept the conclusion you must accept the theory from which it is derived or offer a new justification.

This is just one example among many of how the politics of neoclassical economic theory slips into macromarketing discourse, even when the objective is to sever the link between neoclassical economics and macromarketing. In the present case this likely happened because Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt were not self-consciousness about what they were saying. They were saying it (that markets are superior) because of a long tradition in business schools to uncritically accept and to uncritically assert the superiority of markets. They were speaking and writing out of *habit*, a pattern of speech that arises from the “world where the opposite position is taken for granted,” of which C. S. Lewis spoke.

The second point is this. Every theory, scientific or otherwise, “moves mainly by analogy, a ‘seeing-as’ comprehension of the less intelligible by the more (the earth is a magnet, the heart is a pump, light is a wave, the brain is a computer, and space is a balloon)”.⁶ The process is not different with other embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs whether in myth (The Gods of Mount Olympus), legend (The Man Who Planted Trees) or folktale (The Boy Who Cried Wolf); in religion (for Christians, the resurrection; the sign of the cross), in ritual (Independence Day Parades and May Day celebrations), in social science (Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs; Social Network Analysis; Game Theory; the Sovereign Consumer), or in science (the plum pudding model of the atom; atomic structure as a miniature solar system; food chains; food webs).

Metaphor and analogy are not merely ornamental, nor do they affect the emotions only. *Metaphor is essential for thought*; thinking *is* metaphorical. But there are living metaphors and there are dead metaphors. Living metaphors are those “offered and accepted with a consciousness of their nature as substitutes for their literal equivalents” while dead metaphors “have been so often used that speaker and hearer have ceased to be aware that the words used are not literal”.⁷ McCloskey captured this distinction in *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985) as follows: “Much of the vocabulary of economics consists of dead metaphors taken from non-economic spheres” (p. 76): production *functions*, business *cycles*, *elasticity*, *depression*, *equilibrium*. “The metaphorical content of these ideas was alive to its nineteenth-century inventors. It is largely dead to its twentieth-century users, but deadness does not eliminate the metaphorical element” (p. 79).

This gives rise to the caution. We cannot think independently of the buried metaphor in the words we use. We can only be unselfconscious of the metaphorical nature of the thoughts pursued. We take them to be literal, not metaphorical. But metaphor, buried or not, conditions our perceptions. Continuing with McCloskey now,

Self-consciousness about metaphor ... would be an improvement on many counts. Most obviously, *unexamined metaphor is a substitute for thinking*— which is a recommendation to examine the metaphors, not to attempt the impossible by banishing them. (p. 81, emphasis added).⁸

With these notions in mind, let me make a humble assertion: *the market is a metaphor*. When the term is used by macromarketers they let a particular political position enter their discourse and color their analysis, whether they intended to do so or not.

While Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt want to define macromarketing, quoting George Fisk’s 1974 definition, as “the provisioning system of society,”⁹ they are under no obligation to say that this is a “definition of markets” nor that “markets are the best provisioning system for a society.”¹⁰ To do so once again lets the politics of neoclassical economics slip unseen into their

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discourse.

By constantly using the term *market*, whether alone or imbedded in other terms in their discourse, such as *the market* or *the marketing system*,¹¹ macromarketers unwittingly give the high ground to micromarketers and to neoclassical economists; it is to those traditions that the “market” and its variations (e.g., marketing, marketing system) is grounded. If macromarketers want to set out on an analysis of their own, unshackled by the embedded politics of microeconomics and micromarketing, they need to define macromarketing as the discipline concerned with “the provisioning system of society,” without privileging one provisioning system over others, and there is more than one way to “provision” any particular society.¹² Doing so lets the politics of the privileged drive the analysis *and* the conclusions; it colors the interpretations and the understandings of the reader without any party to the conversation intending to do so.

To the extent that macromarketers do not stop at the point where the discipline is defined as one concerned with “the provisioning system[s] of society, [period, enough said]” then any analyses that result remain encumbered by the politics of the neoclassical economic tradition. It is clear from reading “Macromarketing as Agorology” that Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt want to move beyond microeconomics and micromarketing. They hobble themselves, however, not just with an awkward name, which nobody can say (Agorology), but with their constant reference to “the market” as well. As macromarketers we need to find a new metaphor, a different metaphor. Until we do so, we need to stop using the dead metaphor of “the market” as our central organizing metaphor. Until we find a replacement, we need at least to be conscious of the metaphorical nature of the thoughts we pursue, which means we need to be consciousness of the political aspects of the metaphors we use to pursue those thoughts.

1 *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 26, No 2, December 2006, pp. 131-142.

2 p. 132, col 2.

3 Richard H. Brown (1976), “Social Theory as Metaphor,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 3, p. 174.

4 Thomas Kuhn, “Metaphor in Science,” in *Metaphor and Thought* edited by Andrew Ortony, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 414-415.

5 Austin Farrer (1948), *The Glass Vision*, Westminster, England, The Dacre Press, pp. 57-58

6 Clifford Geertz (1980), “Blurred Genres: the Refiguration of Social Thought,” *American Scholar* 49, p. 168.

7 Margaret 1957, p. 340

8 Donald McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985).

9 George Fisk, *Marketing and the Ecological Crisis*, New York (Harper & Row), 1974.

10 p. 132, col. 2

11 The term macromarketing, itself, is another example.

12 For those that have not read Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (New York, Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1944), I recommend you do, especially if you want to pursue a macromarketing approach to the study of a society's provisioning systems. The essential argument in *The Great Transformation* is that there are more ways than market exchange to institute the economic process and that self-regulating markets were not natural but were politically imposed on society. There are, historically and anthropologically, at least two other ways to institute the economic process and to argue in favor of one, market exchange, against and over the others is to take a political stance. Those new to Polanyi will do well to begin with *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson, editors, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1957) or with *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies* (George Dalton, editor, Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1968).

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